

There's nothing like a surprise!

A new talent

An unexpected gift

A special visitor

A party

Surprises make us feel good, lift our spirits, bring us excitement and happiness, send us into new directions, bring us gifts of affirming love and – sometimes – challenge us!

There was quite a surprise for the apostles and disciples in Judea in today's reading from the Book of Acts. *'Gentiles had also accepted the word of God!!'* Acts 11:1

Sometimes a surprise can come as a bit of a shock! It can bring a completely unexpected and new turn of events. *'Gentiles!!'* A surprise can bring a challenge! Surely *Gentiles can't be included in God's plan of salvation!* Surely *Gentiles can't be loved by God in the same way as God's covenant people, especially those whom Jesus called to follow?*

'The circumcised believers criticized (Peter). Acts 11

They had plenty of questions:

'Why (did Peter) go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'

Why did Peter break all the rules?

You can feel their shock; their disapproval; their outrage.

Peter's explanation was careful as he tried to bring the circumcised believers with him in his actions. It's not easy 'to keep your cool' when something really important is at stake.

In the context of prayer, Peter had a vision that surprised and changed him. It gave him a new perspective; a new understanding. *'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'* Acts 11: T

Soon after, the arrival of the Gentiles brought Peter surprising new understanding. As the Holy Spirit fell on them, Peter remembered the word of the Lord and concluded *'If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?'* Acts 11:

This is revelation! Something dynamic, unexpected and life changing just happened.

'God has given even Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.' Acts 11:18 said Peter's critics. Peter's courageous, rule breaking actions show his openness, obedience and respect for our loving and inclusive God. Following Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit, life can change.

How we can all thank God for Peter's courage, for his stepping out of his comfort zone and obeying the Holy Spirit. His obedience brought all of us new life.

John 13:31b-35 The Love Principle

What is the most important principle we should live by in the new life God has so graciously given to all his people, Jew and Gentile alike?

An old Priest I knew had a simple answer: 'Love' (he would say) "It's just about love."

Jesus said:

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' John 13:35

Easy??

There are surprises in this command to love!

What if we don't even *like* each other?

What if we don't *trust* each other?

What if we don't *understand* each other?

What if we *provoke* each other?

Saying we are great lovers is one thing – being one is quite another.

How we (like Peter) need the prodding and guidance of the Holy Spirit to really follow through on this command.

We need to see things God's way. We need to see people with God's eyes. We need to have great respect for each other and every person – because we are all made in the image of God.

We're called to love those *God* loves – and God loves *everybody!!*

And, sometimes, we get things wrong. Like the people to whom Peter explained his inclusion of Gentiles in the faith, we make rules that exclude people. We put hurdles in the way of faith and participation. We don't always recognise each other's gifts or listen to each other's words with patience, care and respect.

I've thought about this a lot as I've read about the debates in General Synod this week. Some have been so divisive and acrimonious. Where is the rule of love, I've asked? Are we all truly listening with empathy, kindness, openness and perseverance? Where is the deep respect for personhood, for difference, for God's diverse and beautiful creation of all people as the church has argued and disagreed; as hurtful words have been spoken about relationships, about marriage and about gender? The questions being debated are about real lives, real families, real people of faith and there are no easy answers to disagreement and difference.

In the end, the rule of love has to prevail and there might be surprises as we all pray, listen and obey; as the Holy Spirit speaks to and guides the church.

'Love, it's just about love,' said the wise old priest.

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' John 13:35