
Diversity is Good!

**Fourth Sunday in Lent
11th March 2018**

Acts 10: 34-48



Rev John Barr

Do you wear swimmers, bathers or togs when you go to the beach? Well, it really depends on where you live. If you live in Queensland, it's togs. If you live in Victoria or South Australia, it's bathers. If you live in NSW, it's swimmers or perhaps even cossies.

Meanwhile, you go to the cricket with your esky if you are in Australia. But in New Zealand you go to the same place with your chilly bin. When it's time to reach for a cold drink you have a Diet Coke but, if you are in Europe, it's a Coca Cola Light. At meal times you purchase a sausage sandwich but, if you are in Brisbane, it's a sausage in bread. Across Australia you put tomato sauce on your burger while in America it's ketchup.

We live in a world of incredible variety. My wife comes from South Australia and we have had endless debates over whether our children played with "Ley-go" or "Lego". On December 25th is it Father Christmas who leaves those toys by the tree or is it Santa Clause? When our kids were old enough did they go to "skool" or "skooool"?

Diversity and difference is everywhere. It's a way of life. These days we talk about a multicultural society, we refer to languages other than English and we embrace expressions of sexuality and the definition of gender roles in less rigid and, I trust, more open ways.

Meanwhile we are more aware than ever that Christian faith is expressed and lived through many different traditions, denominations and theologies, all of which have their own intrinsic worth.

Increasing diversity is the hallmark of the modern world. We only need to look around us here in northwest Sydney. And the evidence, these days, says diversity is good.

Researchers tell us that encountering diverse experiences and backgrounds fosters creativity and innovation. Here people become smarter and more productive. Exposure to difference makes us increasingly empathetic and considerate.

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In other words, uniformity, similarity and familiarity doesn't challenge. Conformity and like-mindedness fails to stretch our minds and help us grow.

Companies that are committed to gender-diverse leadership are, overall, more successful. Meanwhile authorities claim research undertaken by ethnically diverse teams is of a higher quality. Other observations claim ethnically diverse neighbourhoods lead to greater cohesion and to a better community life compared those who are either homogenous or segregated into specific ethnic enclaves.

In all of this we see diversity is good while uniformity, like-mindedness and sameness is limiting.

This morning we read from scripture a declaration made by Peter. Set in the home of Roman military officer, Cornelius, the declaration says *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."*

Now, this may appear to be a rather obvious, quite accommodating thing to say. As one translation of the New Testament puts it:

"Peter then said: Now I am certain that God treats all people alike. God is pleased with everyone who worships him and does right, no matter what nation they come from."

But what Peter is saying here is actually quite radical. In fact for some people it was a complete and utter scandal. For you see, God created a covenant with the people of ancient Israel and it was through this nation that God chose to reveal God's will and intention. For those involved, this was a special relationship, a unique bond between Israel and Yahweh their God. It was a relationship and a bond that no other people on earth were privileged to. It was an exclusive one.

But now Peter declares there is a new covenant. This is a covenant brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is a relationship, this is a bond, not with one people but with all people. This is a promise made with everyone who chooses to acknowledge God's revelation of grace and love in Jesus.

Friends, diversity is the key point. For, here, there are to be no exceptions. There is to be no partiality, there is to be no favouritism. God is for everyone. And as Peter speaks in Cornelius' house, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, falls upon all those, and I mean, all those, who put their trust in God.

No longer are the People of God defined by a particular homogeneous group. No more is that relationship, that bond between God and humankind the exclusive domain of a particular group or people.

And this incredible break-through goes on to lay the foundation of the Christian community we know today - the church, a body that is so incredibly diverse across the world!

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Friends, I believe diversity is not only good, its God ordained. For, God is a God of diversity. God has intentionally created diversity as an essential part of God's order of things.

But, sadly, communities often choose to resist diversity. Instead, they chose to define themselves over and against that which they see as the "other". Hence, in Jesus' time there were Jews and there were Gentiles. Here there is a preference for familiarity and like-mindedness. There is a longing to hang on to things the group has in common.

Such dynamics are played out in the terrible divisions of our day. Conflict between Shiites and Sunnis within the faith of Islam is an example. Meanwhile we are all aware of the sad legacy within Christianity as Protestants and Catholics carried deep seated suspicions and antagonisms towards one another for centuries.

Division has dominated societies with the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the practice of racial segregation in the United States, the implementation of the White Australia Policy here in this country, and more recently, the exclusion of asylum seekers arriving by boat on our northern shores.

Meanwhile, those who are different are often the targeted quite openly. This occurred among the gay community in Sydney back in 1978. During the first Mardi Gras, participants were subjected to violence, arrest and "outings" as their names were published in the Sydney Morning Herald. This led to a public "shaming" as Mardi Gras participants were ridiculed and abused. Many were subsequently dismissed from their jobs.

The aged are also targets as seniors in our community are often pushed aside, patronised or forgotten. Yet, this part of society carries so much wisdom and can offer so much in the area of life experiences. We are the worse off when our seniors are ignored.

But it is in the area of disability that a lack of respect and a failure to value difference becomes significantly acute. So often people with disabilities are simply viewed as passive objects of pity who have little or nothing to offer.

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And with this in mind our community opts for a “quality of life” ethic rather than a “sanctity of life” one. Here, life is evaluated according to its so-called “quality”, which is fundamentally is a euphemism usefulness and productivity.

But questions need to be asked. Is disability necessarily a bad thing? Does a child, who society considers to be different by having a disability, not have intrinsic worth beyond his or her’s so-called usefulness to society? Surely such child has the potential to offer us something very important, even if that child may make certain demands on the community and even experience a short life?

Friends, God has created a complex, beautiful, bewildering world. And in all of this there is difference and there is diversity.



God’s old covenant with ancient Israel was an exclusive one. Today we read from Acts 10 that all this has changed. God is no longer “partial”, God no longer has “favourites”, God no longer promotes to embrace sameness or homogeneity. God no longer excludes difference or ignores diversity. Rather, God “treats all people alike” and in doing so, God values difference. God promotes and celebrates diversity in its many forms.

And this, my friends, is a call for us to truly value and embrace such diversity. This is a command for us to be a community that is inclusive and accepting, especially towards those who are different.

Over the past few weeks we have been learning about how God loves us unconditionally and without merit. Here we, as followers of Jesus, are a people forgiven, restored and renewed. We call this grace.

This means, in our embracing of difference, we are to love others unconditionally. In other words, we are to love others just as God loves us. In our valuing of diversity, we are to share this joyous, marvellous grace openly and generously with all people.

And we do so by acknowledging this unconditional love is not a love for self only. This unconditional love is not simply a love that is to be confined to the in-group with whom we feel comfortable with. This unconditional love is not just a love for the mob that is familiar to us.

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So what's important here is that we address the things in our lives and the things in the wider community that cause us to resist difference and turn our backs on diversity.

What's essential here is that, as a people of grace, we break down suspicions, insensitivities, prejudices and hostilities towards others who are different. Such things need to go. They must go. They have no place in the community God calls us to be.

Think about it. Look around you. Here in the Parramatta Council area nearly sixty per cent of the population speak a language other than English at home. In Ryde it's nearly half. In Hornsby and The Hills it's nearly one third. Now, that's diversity!

Then there is the presence of the Church of South India congregation here in West Epping and the arrival of their new minister this week. What a significant opportunity this is for us to embrace diversity, to break down anxieties, reservations, suspicions and divisions to celebrate the life and witness of South Indian brothers and sisters here among us. What a great moment this is to reach out in the grace of God to minister together with this new, emerging congregation – and who knows, it may even mean we will grow!

Diversity and difference are part and parcel of God's creation. God intends us to be different. We are never meant to be all the same.

So, as a people of grace let us overcome the divisions and embrace difference. As people restored, forgiven and renewed, let us put aside suspicions and anxieties to celebrate diversity. As a people deeply loved and accepted by God let us offer ourselves in love to others.

For, God shows no partiality, God has no favourites. We are, each and every one of us, loved and cherished by the God who calls us, in our living, to do the same.

Amen.

