

Last weekend Deacon David spoke about “Epiphany” , not just the moment when God revealed Himself to the “Wise men from the East”, but about our own individual “epiphanies”, moments when our life is changed, moments when suddenly we see things in an entirely new light.

Today’s second reading describes just such a moment in the life of St Peter. He was making a speech in the house of the Roman Centurion, Cornelius. Peter was reeling from the shock of being told that foods (like pork) which, as a faithful Jew, he had all his life considered to be unclean, were perfectly acceptable. This came to him as an epiphany, a revelation from God in a dream. This was a huge thing for Peter to accept. In Jesus he saw the fulfilment of the Old Testament. It did not occur to him that the rules and customs he had grown up with needed to change, or even be abandoned.

He was about to baptise Cornelius who was a pagan, did he need to be circumcised? Must he now accept and follow the rules laid down in the Old Testament for faithful Jews? Until this moment Peter would have said “Yes”.

Can you imagine what it must have taken for this good man to say what he did say. “The truth I have now come to realise is that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to Him”

Pope Francis speaks often about the need for the Church to go out to what he calls “the peripheries”. He is talking about people who feel distant from the Church. He is concerned that all too often we seem to be demanding moral perfection from people before we can reach out in welcome. Modern life is very complicated, and people have to make difficult decisions in their lives.

We certainly need to put before people the challenge of the Gospel, but we must start where people actually are.

The Church can sometimes appear to be an exclusive club for the “morally upright”, those who have been successful in following the moral teaching of the Church, with no room for those who struggle to live and love in the often complicated circumstances of their lives.

Sometimes inevitably we make wrong choices, but what matters is that we are genuinely seeking to live and to love as best we can with the help of God’s Grace..

It is those who have made the ideals of the Gospel into a straight jacket, who have, however unwittingly, driven people away.

Pope Francis, or more to the point, Jesus is asking us to reach out in welcome to everyone, to be open to people who are seeking to know Him. In his earthly life Jesus was welcoming to people who for one reason or another were not generally welcome. Sadly the Church has sometimes been just as unwelcoming in the past. If you did not meet the requirements of the law you were not welcome.

Think of the attitude often shown to the divorced and re-married, those living together without marriage, to gay people: How could they see the outstretched arms of Christ in that?

St Peter was challenged by God to think again, to open his mind and heart to new ideas, new possibilities, to discover the generosity of God. A generosity far greater than he could ever have imagined.

May the Holy Spirit, who came down on Jesus at his baptism, open us to new ideas, new possibilities. May he help us to see God at work in people and places we don’t expect.

“In my Father’s house there are many rooms.” It is for each of us to open the doors in welcome.