

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR B

#### First Reading Acts 10: 25–6, 34–5, 44–8

Peter has been asked to visit Cornelius, a Roman centurion at present stationed in Caesarea. This meeting represents a turning point in the new Christians' relationship with the Gentiles. It was fairly common for Gentiles who worshipped the God of Abraham to visit Jewish households, but the reverse was not usual: Jews feared they would become unclean and polluted by foreign cultures.

However, Peter has just had a vision (Acts 10: 11–16) telling him not to worry about the food he was eating: *Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*. He is still troubled by this vision when he is invited to visit Cornelius, *a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say* (Acts 10: 22).



Francesco Trevisani, 'Saint Peter Baptizing the Centurion Cornelius' (1709)

Not only was Cornelius a Gentile, but he also was the 'enemy', a soldier at the pay of the Roman empire. The Spirit makes Peter realise that *God has no favourites* and that this encounter is part of God's plan. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all present, Jewish believers and pagans, confirms Peter's feeling.

This event foreshadows what would become the gradual dominance of the early Church by Gentile converts over the next decades.

## Gospel John 15: 9–17

Today we continue with Jesus's farewell discourse, said to be patterned on that of Moses in Deuteronomy. Both Moses and Jesus look to the future rather than the past as they say farewell. Moses stresses the importance of keeping the commandments, while Jesus speaks of a new and unique commandment: to love one another as we have been loved by him.

### 'Remain in my love'

These verses follow on from last Sunday's text, and take us further into the longest monologue in the fourth Gospel (chapters 15–16), developing the theme of the vine, and what it means to 'abide' or 'remain' in Jesus. For some this may be a mystical experience, but for most it can simply mean staying close to Jesus, keeping constant contact with him and taking time to be alone with him. As '*remain*' is an essential word in vv. 1–8, '*love*' is an essential word in vv. 9–17.

### 'You are my friends'

There was a custom practised at the courts of the Roman emperors and of kings in the Middle East, where a very select group were called the '*friends of the king*' or '*friends of the emperor*'. They had access to the king at all times, even to his bedchamber early in the day. He talked to them before he talked to his generals, his rulers and his statesmen, and they had a close and intimate relationship with him. This is the relationship Jesus offers his disciples and us.

### 'I shall not call you servants any more'

These words would have had a more significant meaning to those hearing them in Jesus's time, than to us today. *Doulos*, the slave, the servant of God, was not a title of shame: it was a title of the highest honour. Moses was the *doulos* of God (Deuteronomy 34: 5), as were Joshua (Joshua 24: 29) and David (Psalm 89: 20).

### 'You did not choose me, no, I chose you'

This phrase is key to the passage. Jesus tells his disciples that the initiative came from him. He loved them first, 'laying down his life' for them, setting a perfect example of love. He called them to an intimate partnership with him.

### 'The Father will give you anything you ask him in my name'

Having elevated them to 'friends', Jesus sends his disciples out as his ambassadors, with a reminder of the fruit-bearing vine. The success of their mission depends on their relationship of love with one another, and with Jesus.