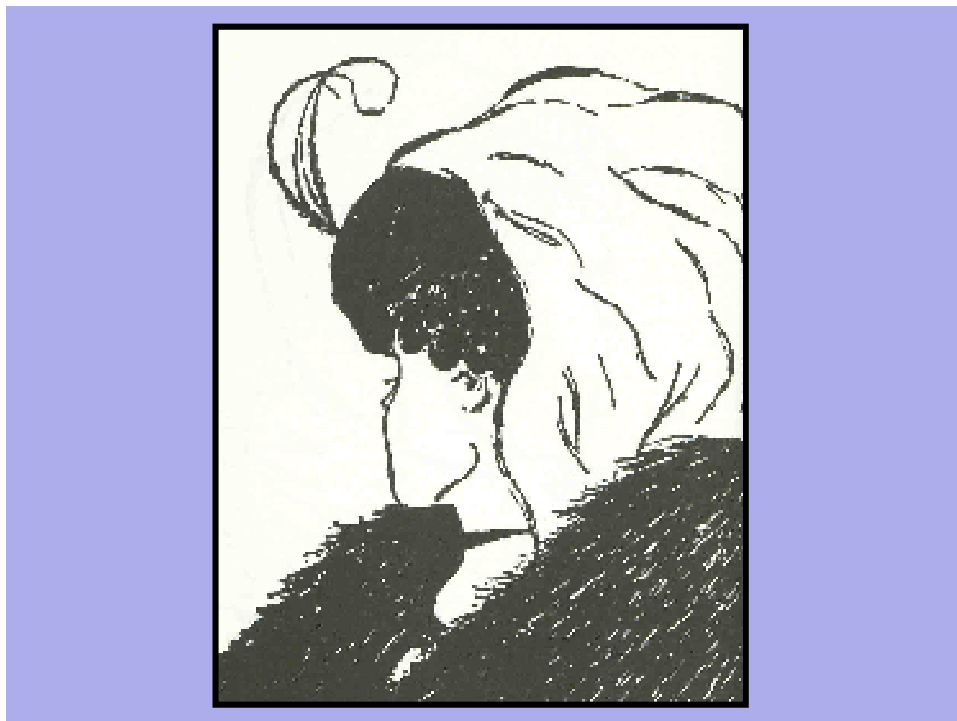


28th March 2010

Doing Church outside the Box

Reading: Acts 10:1-23

We sometimes get stuck! We get stuck in our personal lives and we get stuck in our relationships; we get stuck in our jobs and in the way we do church. In his best-selling book, *The Seven Laws of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey invites us to look at this sketch of a woman?¹



The question is, “Which one?” Actually there are two women in the picture, an elegant-looking young lady and a rather ugly old woman (presumably a witch). Chances are you can see only one of them. Let me tell you where they are. The young lady is looking to our left and slightly away from us. That is her ear you see in the middle of the sketch and her cheek and jaw you see just beneath it and to the left of it. The tip of her nose and her left eyelash are barely visible. You can see her neck and what looks like a necklace of sorts. Ah, but if we turn that ear in the centre of the picture into an eye, and if the cheek and jaw are a large nose, and if the necklace is a mouth and the chest is a protruding chin, we have a witch looking slightly down and to our left. In this drawing it’s not so hard to make

¹Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 26.

out the younger woman. (If you can only see the witch, you may well need counseling! Or perhaps it is the other way round).

This little exercise was done at Harvard Business School. The professor brought into the room a stack of cards. Half of them contained a drawing that accentuated the younger woman, and the other half contained a drawing that accentuated the witch. He passed them out to the class, the picture of the younger woman to the one side of the room and the picture of the older woman to the other. They were given 10 seconds to look at the picture and then they had to hand them in. When he then presented the picture that we see, without accentuation, to the class, almost every person who had seen the young woman in the first picture could *only* see her in the second. But almost all who had seen the other picture, in which the older woman had had been accentuated, could see only her in the second picture. Once you've seen it, it's hard to see anything else.²

This exercise was to show the power of the paradigm. This term came into vogue a couple of decades ago and, I know, it has been overused. We owe it largely to a scientist by the name of Thomas Kuhn.³ After examining the history of science, he made a simple observation. Science does not advance by means of a steady cumulative acquisition of knowledge in a smooth upward curve. Rather, it makes seemingly sudden lurches or paradigm shifts.

He makes a very good point. It's not that there is a sudden multiplication of new data. Rather, the penny drops and we see things in a new way. Once we are wedded to an idea or a worldview, we find it hard to see things differently. To put it more colloquially, we find it difficult to think outside the box. We can get stuck in our thinking and in our experience. And when we get stuck, we usually stop growing both as people and as Christians.

We are about to examine one of the most significant paradigm shifts in Scripture. Were it not for this paradigm shift, we would not be here. The church would not be here. Christianity, as we know it, would never have existed. It's certainly a fascinating story, but it's more than that. *It tells us that God sometimes does the unthinkable; all he requires of us is openness.*

I. GROUND LEVEL

²ibid., 27.

³ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 183-86

To appreciate what is really going on, we need to get down to ground level. Like all good narrators, Luke has a bird's eye view of the events. But he recounts events in sequence, moving from act to act. Of course, the narrator sees the whole picture or he couldn't tell a complete story. But in the process of seeing the entire picture we may lose some important perspectives. If we were hearing the story for the very first time, we would not know what was coming. That would help us to see things from the perspective of the main players.

- A. We meet a remarkable man called Cornelius. He was a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment, stationed in Caesarea, the capital city of Roman-occupied Judea. Luke's description of him is most complimentary. He was obviously a man of some means. He was a God-fearing man, who prayed regularly and gave generously to those in need. Even though he was a Gentile and an officer in the occupying Roman army, he was highly regarded by the Jews. He had not actually converted to Judaism (a proselyte), but had come to believe in the God of Israel and he demonstrated this in his conduct.
- B. At about three o'clock one afternoon, he had a riveting vision. He distinctly saw an angel and he was terrified. The angel instructed him to send men to Joppa to the south of Caesarea, about 50 kilometres along the coast. There they would find a man called Simon Peter who was staying with one, Simon the tanner, in a seaside cottage. He called two of his servants and a soldier who shared his belief in the God of Israel, explained what had happened and sent them to Joppa. Those who have visited Israel will probably remember both places. Caesarea is where the Roman theatre and the excavations of the hippodrome are, and Joppa (Modern-day Yaffo) is the quaint town just to the south of Tel Aviv with the art shops. From it you get a beautiful view of the Mediterranean shoreline. It's a short ride by bus, but it was quite a long journey for the threesome. They were still on the road at noon the next day.
- C. Since we know more or less what's coming, we tend to lose sight of the fact that Cornelius was doing a remarkable thing. Ordinarily he would never request a Jew to come to his home. Although he worshipped the God of Israel, he knew that Jews were Jews and gentiles were Gentiles. Jews did not consort with Gentiles.

You may recall another centurion who sent a request to Jesus to heal his servant but added immediately, "Lord, don't trouble yourself for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word and my servant will be healed" (Luke 7:6-7).

That, I suggest, is what Cornelius would have felt. Ordinarily he would never have had the nerve to ask a Jew to undertake a long journey, nor would have embarrassed himself or his would be guest by issuing such an invitation. But he was emboldened by the appearance of the angel to send for Peter. And God knew what it would take. *He was about to do the unthinkable; all he required was openness.*

D. At this point, Peter has no idea of these goings-on up the coast in Caesarea. We need to remember that; we know, but Peter doesn't!

1. The next day he rises as usual. At noon he heads up to the flat roof to pray. While he is up there, he becomes hungry. Possibly he could smell the meal being prepared below. At that point he suddenly falls into a trance. And he has the oddest vision.
2. He sees heaven opened. A large sheet descends. On it are all kinds four-footed animals, reptiles and birds. In his vision they were alive and probably squirming around.

“Get up, Peter. Slaughter and eat.” His stomach turns!

He responds instinctively, “Certainly *not*, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean!” It is a strong protest. We could render it, “No ways, Lord!”

3. I have heard Peter mercilessly criticized for his response. I don't know why we preachers can't resist pulling Peter apart. I think I have done so myself. (“Sorry Peter!”) We point out astutely that when God commands us to do something, we can either say, “Certainly not,” or we can say, “Lord,” but we can't say both. “Lord” implies unquestioning obedience. Very clever, but we miss the whole point. Of course, Peter should have said, “Certainly not, Lord!” He was brought up kosher. That's the whole point of the vision! Israel's health laws were quite explicit. God, himself, had declared those creepy crawlies out of bounds. I'd have been worried if Peter simply obeyed that bizarre instruction without protest.
4. The Lord then says, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” The mystery intensifies. This happened three times. The sheet was then taken back to heaven.

5. Now it may seem obvious to us with the wisdom of hindsight, but Peter cannot figure out this weird vision. He is completely perplexed by it. He doesn't know anything about Cornelius or the three men who are making their way towards the house where he is staying. He doesn't understand.
6. You see, Peter believed that Gentiles would ultimately be included in God's great plan of salvation. But he could only think of it in one way. Israel would be saved, when it recognized the Messiah. The throne would be set up in Jerusalem. Gentiles would then be included, courtesy of Israel. It is clear that the disciples heard Jesus' command that they were to make disciples of all nations in this framework. That's why they asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? (Acts 1:6) The power of the paradigm! It blinds us and closes us off to truth! But if we are prepared to be open, God helps us to get outside the box. *God is about to do the unthinkable; he's not looking for a rocket scientist. All he wants is openness!*
7. While he is still wondering about the vision, the men find the house. Meanwhile the Spirit says to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

They explained. Peter invited the men into the house as his guests. That was already way out of line. He even put them up for the night. In his mind that was about as unconventional as eating those pigs and creepy-crawlies.

- E. The next day he set out with them and took six Jewish brothers from Joppa along with him. So, the ten men made their way to Caesarea. Quite an expedition! It wasn't until the following day that they arrived in Caesarea.

II. AT THE HOME OF CORNELIUS

- A. It all comes together at the home of Cornelius. When they arrived at his house, they discovered that Cornelius had called together his relatives and close friends in anticipation. As Peter entered his house, Cornelius fell at his feet in reverence, but Peter quickly pulled him to his feet. "Stand up!" he said quickly, I am only a man myself."

- B. Cornelius was a man of some influence, so it was quite a large gathering. Peter came clean right away. He didn't want an elephant in the room. "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for I came without raising any objection" Aha! The penny is beginning to drop. He'd had hours on the road to contemplate the unprecedented step he was about to take. Alongside him as he travelled were three Gentiles. Ahead of him was a house full of Gentiles. Behind him was that disconcerting vision! A paradigm shift is underway! Peter is beginning to think outside the box.
- C. "May I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius tells his side of the story and announces, "Now we are here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."
- D. Peter proclaims the good news in its most basic terms. His address contains all the essential features of the gospel. In fact, many scholars believe that Mark's entire Gospel is an expansion of this sermon.
- E. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. What had happened on the day of Pentecost was happening here, but these were Gentiles!
- F. The unthinkable had happened. Their Jewish prejudice didn't permit it. Their kingdom theology didn't allow for it, either. Not because they didn't *want* to know the truth, but because their paradigm had them boxed in. But God helped them. He placed the matter beyond all reasonable doubt. Peter looked at his six flabbergasted Jewish brothers and said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."
- G. Understandably, when the news reached Jerusalem, Peter came in for some heavy criticism. As far as the Jewish believers were concerned, he had done the unthinkable. All Peter could do was to tell the story and conclude, "Who was I to think that I could oppose God?"
- H. What God wants is openness. Some things are unthinkable, not because they are impossible, nor because they are not part of God's original plan, but because we've gotten boxed in. *God still does the unthinkable; all he requires is our openness!*

III. WHAT ABOUT US?

Yes, we can see how *some* people have blind spots. But how grateful *we* are that we have God's word and God's Spirit! Now, if any of us can say that, it is because we have missed the point altogether. *We too can get stuck!* We are in particular danger of stagnation when we imagine that we have arrived and we have it all together. Conviction is one thing; presumption is another!

- A. *Sometimes we too need a paradigm-shift of sorts.* There may be things that we think are normal and correct in our lives that need examination.

Have you ever noticed how people follow different rituals in the kitchen? Each person seems to have their peculiar way of doing things - little mannerisms and procedures with which they feel comfortable. I remember hearing about one woman's idiosyncrasy. Whenever she prepared ham, she used to take a sharp knife and slice off a small piece from each end before placing it in the pan. A friend was fascinated by the ritual and believed that there must be a good culinary explanation. So she asked her, "Why do you do that?" "Well, that's how one roasts ham; that's how my mother used to do it and her roasts were always delicious."

Fortunately mother was not too far away so the question was referred to her. She too insisted that this was the correct way to roast ham. When pressed for a reason she shrugged her shoulders and explained that *her* mother had always sliced off the edges before placing the ham in the pan. Grandmother was still alive so the question was referred to her. She was somewhat surprised by the inquiry but smiled and explained: "It's really quite simple. Your grandfather and I were married just before the Great Depression. We were poor but ham was relatively cheap and the pan we were given as a wedding present was a little too small to take the ham. So I got into the habit of slicing off the ends in order to get the ham to fit." How traditions are born!

At a more serious level, many of the ideas we imbibe are imbibed unconsciously. We are socialized and accept certain values uncritically. In church life, we make certain assumptions. This or that is the right way to do things. Why? Beware of "the trimmed ham syndrome!"

- B. *Any shift that God brings about is going to be positive and helpful.* It never takes us away from the truth. It always brings the truth into sharper focus. For whatever reason we may not have been able to see something, God graciously

stretches our thinking. You may have people neatly pigeon-holed. Then you meet someone that defies your categorization. You may have an experience that challenges your theological framework. I don't know how many people have told me about situations into which they were thrust that led them to a radical re-think. Reality as we experience it challenges theology as we believe it. We are forced to look at Covey's picture again and, lo and behold, we see the other face. Note here that it is not the Bible that is being challenged or the truth that has changed; it is just our restricted view of it that is being revised.

- C. *Many (I think I can say most) of the breakthroughs in church life have occurred when God did something special – something akin to a paradigm shift.* It's as though God saw that we were not getting it and that, left to our own devices, we wouldn't get it. So he intervened. He kept doing this in the Acts and he has kept doing it throughout the history of the church.

I like the way that John Robinson put it when he addressed the members of his congregation at Delfshaven, in Holland, in 1620. They were about to leave for the New World, via England, aboard the Mayflower.

If God reveals anything to you by any other instrument of his, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break out of his holy word.

Conclusion

This has to be good news for *all* of us. For those who feel they're hemmed in and for those who don't! It happens to individuals and it happens to churches. The power of the paradigm is that we can't see that we have one. Ah, but the Lord is leading us and he knows how to break us out of restricting mindsets. It may be a vision; it may be a flash of illumination as we read Scripture; it may be the insight of a visitor. *God can still do the unimaginable; all he requires is our openness!*