

# A Pivotal Missionary Moment: The Embrace of the Gentiles (Acts 10-11)

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In the second chapter of this volume, “With the Spirit to the Ends of the Earth”, Francis J. Moloney offers a helpful overview and fine digest of Luke’s narrative in the Book of Acts.<sup>1</sup> The focus, as Moloney indicates, is on the action of the Holy Spirit empowering Jesus’ disciples, especially Peter and later Paul, who, along with others, initiate the *missio ad gentes* to spread the Gospel message from Jerusalem to “the ends of the Earth”. Nothing can stop the Spirit’s action, neither opposition, ambiguities, resistance, failure, and sinfulness. This Spirit empowers Jesus disciples to be missionary, to move beyond their limited cultural and religious horizons. Through Paul they travel into Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, finally, to Rome, to “the ends of the Earth”.<sup>2</sup> The geographical sweep of the *missio ad gentes* in Acts is breathtaking. The Spirit’s tangible dynamic presence through these disciples assures the movement’s future, despite opposition and tribulations. Nothing will stop its spread as its members continue to reveal the Good News of God’s delight in creation and humanity touched by the message that the Apostles preach and

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<sup>1</sup> Also helpful is Moloney’s bibliographic references to important scholarship on Acts, which I shall not repeat here.

<sup>2</sup> “The ends of the Earth” is often associated with Rome. The Rome association with “Earth’s ends” comes (1) from the geographic termination of Acts in Rome, and (2) the reference to Pompey’s advance on Jerusalem in 63 BCE found in LXX Ps. Sol. 8.15: “[God] brought someone from the end of the Earth. [...] He decreed war against Jerusalem” (Translation from E. EARLE ELLIS, “The End of the Earth” (Acts 1:8), *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, vol. 1, 1991). I also capitalise “Earth”, to elevate, for the contemporary interpreter of Acts, its ecological symbolism, as a network of interrelated and interconnected living realities, rather than only a geographical identifier. I shall explore this theme towards the end of this chapter.

confirmed by the “signs and wonders” (Acts 2:43; 5:12) that accompany the preached Word.

A significant moment comes in Acts 10 when non-Jews become members of the originally Jewish Jesus movement. The events that conclude Acts 9 prepare for this. In Acts 11, the Jerusalem leaders formally accept their inclusion. These two chapters, Acts 10 and 11, reveal the keys to Luke’s missionary conviction. They reveal the elements the evangelist considers necessary for the Jesus movement to move forward and encounter creatively and openly a social and cultural Greco-Roman climate different from the originating impulse of the Galilean Jesus that first shaped it. Writing two to three generations later, what the evangelist offers is a new missionary paradigm, first revealed, as shall be seen, in the Gospel. What we go on to note from our focus on these specific moments in the Gospel and in Acts 10-11 is how Luke’s insights can still speak afresh to the contemporary Church, seeking by the *missio ad gentes* to proclaim the Word of God as it negotiates new cultures and contexts previously unimagined.

Moloney points out that Jesus’ followers in Acts envision that their mission is to “the ends of the earth”. In a concluding section of this chapter, we shall see that “the ends of the Earth” implies a geographical universality inclusive of all humanity; God’s Word can potentially speak to every culture. “Ends of the Earth” is also an *ecological* image. This means that the missionary-oriented ecclesial community must include creation within its ambit of concern. Such attention becomes more pressing given the global ecological crisis that confronts Jesus followers today.

## 1. The Gospel's Anticipation of Acts

Before moving to highlight what happens in Acts 10-11, it is important to note how Luke prepares for this, first in the Gospel and then in scenes that immediately lead into Acts 10. In the Gospel, Luke employs a vital literary genre, the “commissioning narrative”, to highlight the importance of those who are eye-witnesses to the ministry of the Galilean Jesus and commissioned by God to witness publicly and truthfully about Jesus as “ministers of the Word” (Acts 1:2). These are the faithful and trusted founders of the Lukan household (Lk 1:2). Luke draws upon their witness to formulate a new expres-

sion of the Gospel for Jesus followers living in a different time and place. The commissioning literary form is thus essential for the evangelist, for it confirms the foundational witnesses. In addition, reveals essential missionary elements that will surface later in Acts as the Lukan household seeks to engage the wider Greco-Roman culture.

The commission-genre first appears in the First Testament as God calls prophets and leaders to undertake leadership roles amongst the Israelite people.<sup>3</sup> There are two reasons that Luke draws on the genre of these First Testament narratives and it gives theological credibility to those “eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word” (Lk 1:2). More pertinently, it provides a traditional basis for the missiological development which will occur later in Acts, and upon which Acts 10-11 relies. As we shall see, Luke shapes this particular section of Acts along the lines of a commission narrative. The stories in these chapters reveal how those commissioned, especially Peter, are encouraged to let go of the conventional mode of thinking and acting.<sup>4</sup> This is because they will act to reverse the resistance to change and growth anticipated in those who hold leadership in the Jerusalem household of Jesus’ disciples and have pre-determined those whom God calls. The rupture to conventional order will bring about change, social engagement, and openness within new cultural horizons never envisaged by the Galilean Jesus or His immediate disciples.<sup>5</sup> All this lies at the heart of Luke’s missionary intent.

What applies to the commissioned agents in the First Testament finds echoes in Luke’s Gospel and later in Acts. There are five elements to the commission narrative: (1) *Dislocation*: The one commissioned experiences something that dislocates him from the usual or ordinary. (2) *Divine Encounter*: The experience of dislocation opens the one called to an encounter with God, either directly or through an agent. The divine encounter results in the commission, to act or perceive in a manner that is outside the usual order of expectation. (3) *Perplexity*: This invitation to act or see leads to con-

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Ex 3:1-22; Gn 18:1-15; Jgs 6:11-17; Is 6:1-10; Jer 1:4-10; Am 7:15-17. See N. HABEL, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 77, 1965, 297-323.

<sup>4</sup> R. DAVID, “Du but initial au but subjectif : la réponse des appelés dans les textes de la Première Alliance”, *Studies In Religion-Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 34, 2005, 197-211.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

fusion. It requires further investigation or reflection as the one called seeks clarity in the midst of perplexity. (4) *Affirmation and Resolution*: God (or the divine agent) acts to bring about assuredness and confidence in the experience. This affirms the one called to act and perceive what occurs. This resolves the difficulty and perplexity. (5) *Witness*: God's commissioned agent finally lives out the new direction. This happens, though, not without criticism and resistance from others who do not fully understand the agent's action or perception.

This formal pattern is evident in the annunciation stories associated with the angelic call of Zechariah (Lk 1:8-23), and especially Mary (Lk 1:26-38) and Jesus' invitation to Simon Peter and his companions to "become fishers of people" (Lk 5:1-11). The genre's pattern also overlays the approach the evangelist takes in telling the stories in the Gospel's concluding chapter that describes the events that surround Jesus' resurrection. Here the evangelist adopts the commissioning narrative genre to recount the women's discovery of the tomb's emptiness as they come to learn its meaning from two angelic-like characters who commission them to announce the resurrection of Jesus to His disciples (Lk 24:1-12). The genre shapes the way the story unfolds as the Risen Jesus accompanies two disciples travelling away from Jerusalem, the birthplace of their discipleship, to Emmaus (Lk 24:14-35). Discouraged by what had happened there in the execution of Jesus, they learn of His presence with them in the "breaking of bread" and return to Jerusalem to announce what they have experienced. In the Gospel's final scene (Lk 24:36-49), the Risen Jesus comes into the midst of His perplexed and frightened disciples, dispels their doubts, commissions them as His future witnesses as they await to be "clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:48). Luke's Gospel ends anticipating the next stage in the Jesus story that will unfold in Acts.

The main features of the commission narratives (dislocation / divine encounter / perplexity / affirmation and resolution / witness) become the overarching shape of Luke's Acts. The Jerusalem Jesus members encounter God's presence first in the Risen Jesus who ascends into the heavens, then in the Spirit at Pentecost, and Jesus commissions them explicitly (Acts 1:8). The Spirit's descent at Pentecost empowers them (Acts 2:1-47). As Moloney describes it, this presence pervades Luke's story-line throughout Acts, implicitly or explicitly, gives direction and confidence in times of persecution and

resistance (Acts 3:1-28:16), until finally Paul arrives at Rome (Acts 28:17-31) and the heart of the Roman Empire. In this setting, Paul lives under house arrest “preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ most openly and unhindered” (Acts 28:31). On this final note of hope and optimism, Luke concludes the narration of God’s marvellous deeds. God’s ultimate commission, to preach “to the ends of the Earth”, awaits realisation.

## **2. Acts 10-11: Luke’s Missionary Paradigm**

The watershed moment that allows the commissioned disciples to move outside of Jerusalem and Judea, into the non-Jewish Greco-Roman world, comes in Acts 10. This becomes a critical event. Here the evangelist captures something of an authentic historical memory that occurred decades earlier before the writing of Acts: Non-Jews sought membership into what seemed to be an exclusive Jesus Jewish movement. As Luke narrates the event in Acts 10, the evangelist reshapes the First Testament’s commission narrative replicated in the Gospel.

The elements that we find in the Gospel that typify the commission literary genre provide Luke with the framework for recounting this central moment in Acts: Peter, outside the usual place of order, Jerusalem, begins to move to the geographical fringes of Judea (Acts 9:32-43). He experiences a vision, a definitive moment of dislocation that creates perplexity and confusion (Acts 10:9-16). The Spirit’s presence resolves the perplexity, allowing for a new understanding (“commission”) to emerge. This determines a fresh creative moment for the future life of the Jesus movement (Acts 10:23-48). This happens not without its critique by those who initially want to confine the Spirit’s action, but later endorse this new moment and give praise to God (Acts 11:1-18). Luke integrates into it aspects or elements essential for the future mission of the Jesus movement. These suggest seven “experiences” or theological principles, explicated below, paradigmatic for a Church seeking to engage the post-modern world.

Luke offers hints of what will definitively and formally occur in Acts 10 in the chapters that lead up to it. After the Pentecost experience of the empowerment by the Spirit (Acts 2), membership of the Jerusalem Jesus community, despite opposition and suffering, expands under the direction of Peter (Acts 3-5). The Jerusalem leaders

of the community appoint seven members to respond to internal complaints between the Greek and Jewish-speaking members (Acts 6:1-7). One of them, Stephen, is executed (Acts 6:8-8:3). Another, Philip, moves into Samaria (Acts 8:4-25) – an initial indicator of the move outside of Jerusalem and Judea. Further, his baptism of an Ethiopian court official on pilgrimage from Jerusalem and returning home (Acts 8:26-40), alerts Acts’ audience that the expansion of the Jesus movement beyond its originating Jewish setting is not an isolated event. More is yet to come. The change of heart that Saul (“Paul”) undergoes – from persecutor of Jesus’ disciples to membership – reveals that the Spirit’s action is unstoppable (Acts 9:1-25). With the support of Barnabas, the Jerusalem leaders accept the surprising authenticity of Saul’s discipleship who returns to Tarsus (Acts 9:26-30). The peace that comes on Judea, Galilee, and Samaria through the “consolation of the Holy Spirit”, as identified in Acts 9:31, prepares them for the next moment in Luke’s story that establishes the context for the momentous events that will unfold in Acts 10.

## 2.1 Dislocation

In the next verse, Luke notes: “It happened as Peter travelled among them all, he came down also to the saints residing at Lydda (Acts 9:32).”<sup>6</sup> With the mention of this explicit geographical marker, Lydda, Luke moves Peter out of Jerusalem and symbolically nearer to the Gentile world. Lydda is geographically closer to the Mediterranean coast than Jerusalem, and more distant from the Jewish world with which Peter is familiar and at ease.<sup>7</sup> Lydda also symbolises something else. For it is the transitional space between the known and unknown, between the Jewish and Gentile worlds, and becomes the place where Peter heals the bedridden paralytic, Aeneas. The healing occurs in a manner that echoes the actions of Jesus in the Gospel (Lk 5:18-26; 13:11-13). The name of the paralytic, “Aeneas”, occurs only in Acts, nowhere else in the Second Testa-

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, I offer my own translation of Acts.

<sup>7</sup> See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 5, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 1992, 179. Lydda is the city of Lod in the First Testament (1 Chr 8:12). It lies in Judean territory (1 Mc 11:34), but only 17 kilometres from Joppa, the next place in Acts to which Peter moves.

ment. Though common in the Greco-Roman world and attested by Josephus (*Ant* 14.10:22), the name would honour the memory of one of Rome's three founders (Aeneas, Romulus, and Remus).<sup>8</sup> If this is Luke's intent in this explicit identification of the subject of Peter's healing deed, then Act's audience and Peter have stepped finally into the Gentile world, a move confirmed in the healing scene that immediately follows (Acts 9:36-45).

Luke's scene switches next to the coastal town of Joppa ("Jaffa"), symbolically associated with the Gentile world that surrounds the Mediterranean. Here we learn that a female Jesus disciple named "Tabitha" or "Dorcas" in Greek, which means "gazelle", and known for her generosity, has become ill and died. As John Chrysostom comments, her name matched her character "as active and wakeful was she as an antelope".<sup>9</sup> The audience alert to this association with Dorcas' name, which Luke prefers rather than Tabitha (Acts 9:39), would know about the prominence of the gazelle in Israel's hill country and on the coastal plains around Joppa.<sup>10</sup> More symbolically, the animal represented marginality. It inhabited the margins, between desert and town, the rural and urban. Considered both wild and tame, some rabbis regarded it with a certain degree of holiness that, when eaten, did not compromise the purity restrictions in Jewish dietary laws.<sup>11</sup>

All these associations with the name of Dorcas suggest that Peter has moved into an unfamiliar Greco-Roman place occupied by a female Gentile Jesus disciple, perhaps a proselyte. Her resurrection, activated through the agency of this leader of the Jerusalem Jewish Jesus household, moves her from the margins to the centre. In this geographically and culturally unaccustomed place, away from the Jerusalem centre, Peter acts to restore the woman to life and community. Here, his action is reminiscent of the healings of Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kgs 17:17-24 and 2 Kgs 4:32-37, and parallels Jesus' resurrection of the son of the widow of Nain in Luke 7:11-16. Peter is in

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<sup>8</sup> A. ERSKINE, "Rome in the Greek World: The Significance of a Name", in A. POWELL, *The Greek World* (ed.), Routledge, London 1995, 368-382.

<sup>9</sup> JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 21 on Acts of the Apostles*, as quoted by R. STRELAN, "Tabitha: The Gazelle of Joppa (Acts 9:36-41)", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 39, 2009, 77-86.

<sup>10</sup> R. STRELAN, "Tabitha: The Gazelle of Joppa (Acts 9:36-41)", 78.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

a marginal situation reinforced by his association, as we learn in the next scene, with a tanner.

Luke next notes that Peter resides “for many days” in Joppa with a leather tanner called Simon (Acts 9:43).<sup>12</sup> Luke’s purpose in giving detail of Peter’s companion and repeating his location, that Simon is a tanner and his house is, as we discover later, “by the seaside” (Acts 10:6), is not to offer an incidental backdrop to the story. The location of this Joppa house (“by the seaside”) was deliberate. The sea breezes would help disperse the unpleasant aroma that came from curing the skins in the tanning process and would have easily penetrated Peter’s clothing. Peter is thus associating with someone, and in a location, that make him quintessentially impure. This compromises his purity status and introduces a major issue about which Peter will be involved in the next scene. The author of Acts will take this matter up a few chapters later: the association of Jews and non-Jews in the Jesus movement. It begins with this experience of the leader of the Jesus movement spatially and culturally *dislocated* in the Greco-Roman world. This becomes reinforced as Luke next moves our attention further up the coast to Caesarea and to a centurion of an Italian cohort named Cornelius (Acts 10:1). We have now moved definitively into the Gentile world.

## 2.2 Divine Encounter

We note that this Gentile, like Dorcas in the earlier scene, emulates the essential discipleship qualities that Luke’s Jesus affirmed in the Gospel: generosity in spirit and practice (Lk 6:29; 9:3; 10:34-35; 12:22-24, 33-34; 17:33; 18:18-37). “Good works and deeds of charity” (Acts 9:36) typify Dorcas’ life. Material generosity to all without exception (Acts 10:2) characterise Cornelius. Luke also notes Cornelius’ religious sentiment and conviction. These mirror the prayerful practice that permeates Luke’s Christological portrait. Like Jesus, Cornelius “prayed constantly to God” (Acts 10:3). As he prays on one occasion he sees an unobstructed vision of an angel coming to him. A vision, common in Acts, is indicative of God’s participation and initiative in what takes place. There are several aspects

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<sup>12</sup> J. McCONNACHIE, “Simon a Tanner (Acts 9:43; 10:6, 32)”, *Expository Times*, vol. 36, 1924-1925, 90.



about this vision. The initiative is from God. What now happens is divinely instituted. The angel addresses him, affirms his piety and generosity (Acts 10:4), and directs him to send messengers to Joppa to bring Peter to Caesarea (Acts 10:1-6). Cornelius' angelic encounter is also typical of the commission-genre structure noted earlier: the encounter with a divine agent that leads to perplexity in the one addressed; a word of affirmation frees the subject to hear the commission and act. Cornelius sends envoys to Peter. The rest unfolds as the angel directs.

With this presence of the angel and the commission addressed to Cornelius, Luke underscores the next important reality that enables the narrative to move forward: God has entered the scene. Cornelius' natural religious disposition prepares for this experience of God. His religious openness to God prepares him for the angelic vision.

Cornelius' experience of God dovetails nicely with the next scene, in which Peter encounters God, but in a very different way (Acts 10:9-23). It happens through his stomach! Like Cornelius in the preceding scene, we note Peter's prayerful disposition that leads him to go up on to Simon's housetop to pray in the middle of the day. Hunger overcomes him, and he falls into a trance. Like Cornelius, Peter sees a vision from heaven. God is present. Unlike Cornelius, though, the vision is not of an angel but of a great sheet let down from the heavens that holds different creatures (Acts 10:12). A heavenly voice instructs Peter to kill and eat them. His reaction is clear: "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common [Gk: *koinos*] or unclean [Gk: *akathartos*]" (Acts 10:14). Peter's reaction to the heavenly vision and the instruction, or commission, to eat concerns that which he (and all his Jerusalem colleagues) would regard as "common" and "unclean". While this applies in the first instance to food, it also affects their association with those people considered *koinos* and *akathartos*. The divine declaration that immediately follows Peter's statement, "That which God has cleansed, you are not to declare common [*koinos*]" (Acts 10:15), redefines the boundaries of what and who are judged as *koinos* and *akathartos*. Peter has already begun to blur these separating boundaries through his association at Joppa with the tanner Simon and his resuscitation of Dorcas, and, earlier, in Lydda, his healing of Aeneas. Luke adds, regarding Peter's vision of the heavenly sheet, that "this happened three times" (Acts 10:16). It is not clear to what the "this" refers. Is it the vision? Is it Pe-

ter's reaction to what he is ordered to do? Is it the divine re-evaluation of what is common or unclean? Or all of these?

### 2.3 Perplexity

Whatever Luke's intent with this phrase, the import of the vision is yet to await its full revelation. In the meantime, Peter is left in a state of deep perplexity, perhaps even anxiety, as to the vision's meaning (Acts 10:17). Again, Luke employs and adapts the commission narrative genre. Peter's divine encounter and the accompanying commission to reconsider what is common and unclean leaves him perplexed. It awaits resolution. This will begin as Cornelius' envoys arrive to invite Peter to go with them to Caesarea the following day (Acts 10:17-24). Importantly, its resolution will require one further thing from Peter – an openness and willingness to reflect on his experience. Luke tells us that Peter continues to “ponder” the vision as his Caesarean entourage arrives. This capacity to ponder upon that which confuses or baffles is characteristic of other Jesus disciples (for example, Mary in Luke 1:29, the women at the tomb in Luke 24:4, and the two on their way to Emmaus in Luke 24:32). Contemplation is the path towards resolution. Further exposure into that which is dislocating, common and unclean will force Peter to ponder the meaning of the heavenly sheet and the divine injunction that went with it; afterall, it will open him to a new, radical insight that will define the future of the Jesus movement.

### 2.4 Affirmation and Resolution

Peter, accompanied with other Jerusalem companions from Joppa (Acts 10:23) – a small detail that will become important later – arrives at the house in which Cornelius, his family and friends gather (Acts 10:24-27). He freely enters a foreign household that exposes him to an unfamiliar situation in which a new perception will emerge. This household is very different – geographically, culturally, and ethnically – from the Jerusalem Jesus gathering most familiar to Peter. His Jerusalem colleagues who accompany him would regard Cornelius and his household as “common” and “unclean”. Peter, however, comes to a different point of view in a declaration that partly resolves his earlier perplexity over the heavenly sheet: “You yourselves understand how unlawful it is for a Jewish male to associ-

ate with or visit any foreigner; but God has shown me that I should not call any human being common or unclean. Therefore, when I was sent for, I came without objection. Therefore, I ask why have you sent for me?" (Acts 10:28-29).

Peter recognises that God has reconfigured what is conventional about who and what is unclean. As Peter understands it, the decision of who is common or unclean does not belong to human beings but God. This awareness allows Peter to go with Cornelius' delegation, come to the Roman port city of Caesarea, and enter into the centurion's house.

However, Peter needs to take one further step before he can articulate the full implications of his presence in this unorthodox Gentile world. This will come as Peter hears Cornelius narrate his encounter with the angel and God's self-communication to him (Acts 10:30-32). With Cornelius' concluding words, "all of us are before God" (Acts 10:33), Peter finally comes to realise that the God of the Jews, the God of his ancestors revealed to him through Jesus and confirmed through the reception of the Spirit at Pentecost, is also the God of this Roman centurion and his Gentile household. The same God has acted in each of them and Peter now offers a full declaration. This will determine the future relationships between Jews and non-Jews within the Jesus household. The pronouncement resolves Peter's perplexity over the animal-bearing heavenly sheet and the divine affirmation not to consider unclean what God declares clean. Having continued to reflect about this as he listens to Cornelius' experience, Peter definitively states: "In truth I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation the one who fears God and does what is right is welcomed by God" (Acts 10:34-35).

Peter confirms that God does not have ethnic or cultural preferences. No ethnic or religious group can act with the presumption that God prefers one over the other. The fundamental criterion for divine acceptance and welcome, according to Peter, is to "fear" God and "do what is right". In other words, a humble sincerity to God's action ("fear") and a commitment to live guided by this disposition (to do "what is right"), are the essential qualities that reveal peoples' openness to God and God's communion with them. Peter knows how these religious qualities have guided his own Jerusalem co-religionists. He now recognises them in Cornelius' Gentile Roman household. The God of the Jews is also the God of the Gentiles.

This leads Peter to offer to Cornelius' household a summary of the Gospel about Jesus that culminates in His death and resurrection, and the command to preach and witness to all people about God's action in Jesus (Acts 10:34-41). Peter concludes his summary affirming that all who believe in Jesus will have "forgiveness of sin" (Acts 10:43). They will experience divine *shalom*, ultimate divine communion.

At this moment, a remarkable event occurs. God's Spirit comes upon all who listen to Peter's words (Acts 10:44). This parallels the first Pentecost with the Spirit's descent on the Jerusalem household in Acts 2. The Gentile-believers are now bearers of the same Spirit that descended first upon their Jerusalem brothers and sisters. This divine action reveals God's impartiality. The Spirit's descent confirms Peter's insight, that God accepts all who are humbly open and receptive to God's action manifest through Jesus. The Spirit's descent upon all those in Cornelius' household implies that God's presence is not culturally, ethnically or even religiously restricted. It is available to all. This surprises his Jerusalemite acquaintances who have come with him from Joppa: "And the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and exalting God" (Acts 10:45-46).

The Jerusalem companions of Peter witness this new moment in the action of the Spirit and offer collegial confirmation. Their presence and witness move the event beyond a private revelation given only to Peter. His declaration, that these Gentiles who have received the Holy Spirit should be baptised, completes the scene and formally incorporates the non-Jewish Gentile believers into the household of Jesus' disciples (Acts 10:47-48).

## 2.5 Witness

Peter returns to Jerusalem and is at once "criticised" (Gk: *diakrinō*) by "the circumcision party" (Acts 11:2), who would predetermine how God might regard the Gentiles. The *diakrinō* is a discriminatory act of judgement against Peter. They ask him, "Why did you go to the uncircumcised and eat with them?" (Acts 11:3). Peter responds by narrating his experience, of the vision, the heavenly voice and what happened when he entered the Gentile household in Caesarea. Peter affirms that all that happened was under the aegis of the

Holy Spirit (Acts 11:12; 15-16). He adds a further note that confirms the action of God's Spirit amongst the Gentiles: "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. I remembered the Word of the Lord, how He said 'John baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit'. If then God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to prevent God?" (Acts 11:15-17).

Peter's witness counteracts the *diakrinō* from the more conservative Jerusalem believers. This witness, in the face of opposition and disbelief, is Peter's attestation to the God who calls him (Lk 5:1-11), the Jerusalem disciples in the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2, and now the Gentiles. It is this God that Peter could not and cannot resist or "prevent". In other words, Peter witnesses God's action and affirms that what has happened has not come about through his initiative. It is not the result of human inventiveness or ingenuity. What has happened had occurred because of God. God's embrace of the Gentiles, revealed through the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them and their speaking in tongues, and confirmed by the witness of the Jerusalemites who accompanied Peter from Joppa, is ultimately God's act. It is unstoppable, as Peter explains to his Jerusalem colleagues.

Peter's attestation of his experience in Joppa and in Caesarea, of God's initiative amongst the Gentiles, leaves his Jewish co-religionists silent. This is the appropriate response before the revelation of God's action attested by Peter. The final word in this whole drama that will define the course and focus of the future mission of the household of Jesus followers comes not from Peter but from the gathered Jerusalem disciples themselves. Presumably these would also include the "circumcision party": "They glorified God, saying, 'Even then to the Gentiles God has granted repentance unto life'" (Acts 11:18).

This acclamation recognises that God is not only a God for the Jews. The Jewish Jesus disciples now recognise and affirm that the life-bearing gift of the Holy Spirit that comes from communion with God ("repentance"), first experienced by the Jerusalem Jesus followers, includes the Gentiles. This conviction tangibly unfolds in the scenes and chapters that follow, after Herod executes James, one of the central Jerusalem figures (Acts 12:1-5), imprisons Peter (Acts 12:6-19), and himself undergoes an ignominious death (Acts 12:20-23). After this, Luke notes, "The Word of God grew and multiplied"

(Acts 12:24). This growth happens, now until the end of Acts, through Paul. He brings this Word finally to Rome and fulfils Jesus' prediction made at the beginning of Acts, that the disciples will be his witnesses to the "ends of the Earth" (Acts 1:8). But, what did Luke mean by this expression "ends of the Earth"? And what can it mean for us today in the midst of the present global ecological crisis that we now face? It is to these questions that we now turn as we complete this study of Acts 10-11.

### 3. "The End of the Earth"

In the beginning of Acts, the resurrected and commissioning Jesus affirms the universality of His disciples' witness. They are to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the Earth" (Acts 1:8). Many scholars allow this statement to define the structure of Acts.<sup>13</sup> The disciples begin their testimony in Jerusalem and Judea (Acts 1:12-8:3), then witness in Samaria (Acts 8:4-40), finally, with Paul, into the wider Greco-Roman world that surrounds the Mediterranean (Acts 9:1-28:31).<sup>14</sup>

In a manner that reveals Luke's dependency on Isaiah, which shapes the evangelist's agenda, Luke's use of "Earth's ends" also echoes Isaiah 49:6.<sup>15</sup> This is part of a second song about God's servant, who acts on God's behalf, suffers and reveals God's salvation to "Earth's end". Isaiah affirms that God's salvation is not reserved to a particular people but is inclusive of all. According to God, Isaiah's prophetic servant will be a "light for all". God says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the Earth" (Is 49:6).

It is possible, in fact, usual, to understand the focus of the servant's mission primarily in terms of human beings. He is to bring God's light to all the nations. This is a theme in Isaiah, that confirms

<sup>13</sup> For example, L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> See also Francis J. Moloney in chapter 2 of this volume, footnote 7.

<sup>15</sup> On Luke's integration of Isaianic themes in Luke-Acts, and not merely a proof-text approach to Isaiah, see T. MOORE, "'To The End of the Earth': The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of the Isaianic Influence on Luke", *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 40, 1997, 389-399.

the prophet's eschatological vision of salvation for all people ("nations") who stream to Jerusalem in the final days (Is 2:2; 66:18-20), share God's feast (Is 26:6-7), and worship God (Is 56:7) with righteousness and praise (61:11).

In the opening verse that begins Isaiah's song, though, something further suggests itself. The servant addresses coastlands and those who live in distant lands: "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!" (Is 49:1).

The servant invites the non-human world, the lands of the coast, and those who live in distant places to attend to what is going to be revealed about God's servant. The postscript that immediately follows the song celebrates the redemptive power of a God who liberates humanity and creation (Is 49:7-26). It is within this wider ecological setting that God's salvation reaches to "the ends of the Earth". These "ends" imply humanity – all peoples that are "far away". But it also includes all of Earth's creatures and the whole of creation that the servant encourages to exalt and join in song (Is 49:13).

In Luke's world, Earth's "end" implied a defined geography in a cosmos which consisted of an inner land mass surrounded by an outer ocean ("oceanos"). The "end of the Earth" was contiguous to the oceans for it linked land to sea.<sup>16</sup> It was where the inhabited and civilised world stopped. This is clear from the geographer Strabo (64-63 BCE – 24 CE) who writes that the "inhabited world is an island. For wherever it has been possible for humans to reach the ends of the Earth, sea has been found. And this sea we call 'Oceanus'".<sup>17</sup> For Luke, then, the expression "the end of the Earth" is a definitive geographic identifier that locates the connection between land and sea and defines boundaries.

To the ears of the contemporary listener of Acts, sensitive to what is happening on this planet, however, the expression evokes something else. It concerns *Earth*. While Luke would not have consid-

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<sup>16</sup> W.C. VAN UNNIK, "Der Ausdruck ΕΩΣ ΕΣΧΑΤΟΥ ΤΗΣ ΓΗΣ (Apostelgeschichte I 8) Und Sein Alttestamentlicher Hintergrund", *Sparsa Collecta*, vol.1, 1973-83, 386-391, as referenced in E. EARLE ELLIS, "The End of the Earth" (Acts 1:8)", 126.

<sup>17</sup> STRABO, *Geography* 1, 1, 8; cf. 1, 2, 31; 1, 4, 6; see, E. EARLE ELLIS, "The End of the Earth" (Acts 1:8)", 126. For a further discussion on "ends of the Earth", see L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 26-27.

ered “Earth’s ends” in ecological terms, today’s audience would be sensitive to the way we treat Earth. In this context, concerned about what happens on this planet, Earth represents more than a land mass linked to the oceans. It is an ecological image of interconnected relationships, a network of organic and non-organic matter and a living organism. From this perspective, Earth is a symbol not determined by human beings, but an interconnected vital system in which humanity lives and expresses its civilized reality. From an explicit environmental viewpoint, this acknowledges that “the ends of the Earth” is more than a specific geographic space defined by human beings and controlled by their presence. We can imagine another boundary, an ecological one, that lies beyond a specific Earth-space demarcated by human occupation.

To venture to the “end of the Earth” is to come to the unknown; fraught with danger, but also with possibility. This “end” can become a space where the new might be revealed in terms of eschatological healing of what has occurred through Earth’s human habitation and abuse of Earth’s goods. In fact, “end of the Earth” might be symbolic of two things. Positively, it might represent the eschatological climax of God’s vision for creation; negatively, it could express the end of the Earth itself caused by destructive forces initiated by human beings. “End of Earth” could be, for the Lukan contemporary listener, a rich symbol of creative possibilities or cautious action for the health of the planet. Jesus’ words to missionary-oriented disciples, to “the ends of the Earth”, can be reinterpreted for today’s Jesus follower as an ecological mission. It is one in which Pope Francis has urged us to engage given the critical ecological situation of Earth. As he writes in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’*: “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, involvements and talents” (LS 14); “[...] social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a ‘culture of care’ which permeates all of society” (LS 231).

#### 4. Missionary Insights

To return to Luke’s story in Acts 10-11, there are important perceptions that the evangelist offers us today. These speak into one of the central moments of Church development that Karl Rahner (1904-1984) identifies. He speaks of three epochs in the growth of the



Church.<sup>18</sup> The first was as a Jewish “movement”, then it expanded beyond Judaism welcoming Gentiles, finally, at Vatican II, the Church embraced a universal mission. Rahner’s second epoch is what Luke narrates in Acts 10-11. Here, Luke offers us theologically rich insights that help discern the dynamics undergirding this major shift of the Jesus movement away from Judaism to the non-Jewish, Gentile world and beyond. As we have suggested in our reflection upon “to the ends of the Earth”, this “beyond” must also consider an ecological mission that involves care of Earth and all that exists, human and non-human creation, at “Earth’s ends”. This is Rahner’s third epoch, the Church’s embrace of its universal mission to humanity and creation.

In our study of Acts 10-11, we note how Peter begins a new stage in the growth of the Jesus movement, Rahner’s second epoch, as he physically moves away from Jerusalem. Thus begins a transition from the setting of the Gospel’s conclusion and the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles*. It is the place where Peter experiences the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Next, his contact with those who need healing (Aeneas and “Gazelle”) in Lydda and Joppa, towns on the geographical boundary of Judea closer to the Mediterranean coast, confirms his journey away from the conventional and expected. As he resides a few days in Joppa with a tanner, he becomes more dislocated.

All these images – a boundary town, people in need of healing and his unclean residential companion – reinforce his sense of displacement away from Jerusalem, the original epicentre of the Jesus movement. These prepare him for the cultural and ethnic shifts which he finally comes to realise that the Jesus movement must make. In the household of the centurion, Cornelius, in the Mediterranean coastal town of Caesarea, Peter recognises that God also acts amongst the Gentiles. Cornelius’ narration of his encounter with God’s messenger (Acts 10:30-32) that concludes with the affirmation that “all of us are before God” (Acts 10:33), brings Peter to declare, in Acts 10:34-35, that God is not discriminatory and accepts all who act with reverential openness (“fear”) and integrity (“do what is right”). God acts within Judaism, and Peter’s encounter with the pious Gentiles brings him to realise that God is also amongst the Gentiles.

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<sup>18</sup> K. RAHNER, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II”, *Theological Studies*, vol. 40, 1979, 716-727.

Here we come to the essence of Luke's perception about mission. Rather than Peter bringing "God" to the Gentiles, he learns that God is already acting amongst them. The missionary encounter, if one can call it thus, is an encounter with God's self-revelation. The mission becomes one of discovery by the appointed leader of the Jesus movement. Luke, however, provides the stratagem to enable this discovery to occur. We have identified five: dislocation, divine encounter, perplexity, affirmation-resolution, witness. These might be summarised in a way that suggest the essential components of missionary action today.

1. *Dislocation*. Peter moves away from the epicentre of the Jerusalem Jesus movement to a geographical and cultural context that dislocates him, physically and spiritually. He experiences being amongst those regarded as unclean or impure. He enters households others would judge as unworthy of his presence and God's action. Luke would affirm that authentic missionary endeavour begins with a move to the margins and the encounter with the socially unclean and impure. Pope Francis reflects this same attitude when he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The Church which 'goes forth' is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. [...] An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the 'smell of the sheep' and the sheep are willing to hear their voice" (EG 24).

This first step to the margins that brings involvement in the lives of others is the most difficult. It allows for an encounter with what Francis names "the suffering flesh of Christ in others" (EG 270). This encounter makes one "take on" the "smell of the sheep". This is more than noticing that the odour is different. It means that missionary-evangelisers absorb the same odour as those among whom they live. This forms an identity. We see this graphically portrayed in Peter's Joppa residence with the tanner Simon. Peter's communion with potential disciples in Cornelius' house also illustrates this, especially after the experience of the Spirit's descent on all who hear his words (Acts 10:44).

2. *Openness to the Sacred*. Peter encounters God first through a perplexing vision that he does not fully understand, then in the pres-

ence of those declared unclean or common. Finally, he comes to learn that God's self-communication continues to occur, despite what seems impossible. This sensitivity to the possibility of the sacred is foundational to the shift that Peter finally makes. Luke notes how he reflects upon and contemplates the vision (Acts 10:19) which confuses him (Acts 10:17). Openness to the sacred, of the immanence of God's presence, within what appears to be confusing or perplexing realities, is central. Luke notes how this contemplative spirit lies at the heart of two of the Gospel's central characters, Mary (Lk 1:29; 2:19) and Jesus who often prays (Lk 3:21; 6:12; 9:28; 22:39-46; 23:34, 46). Pope Francis speaks of the need to look at what is happening around us with a "contemplative gaze": "God's revelation tells us that the fullness of humanity and of history is realized in a city. We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares. God's presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart" (EG 71).

Francis' words echo Peter's experience in Joppa and the house of Cornelius. He "uncovers" God's presence amongst them. It is unhidden and real in the lives of those who live with a "sincere heart". This contemplative spirit, seen in Peter and affirmed by Francis, will recognize God already present in what seems confusing or different. It can guide the contemporary evangeliser.

3. *Affirmation and Witness.* Luke's portrait of Peter in Acts affirms his role as leader and spokesperson of the Jerusalem gathering of Jesus disciples. His leadership is clear in the directions he gives for Judas' replacement to reconstitute the Twelve (Acts 1:15-22), in the events that surround Pentecost (Acts 2:14-42) and its aftermath (Acts 3:1-4:22). His presence is essential for Luke in the move to embrace the Gentiles as full members of the Jesus movement. His experience of God's presence through Cornelius and his household and its confirmation in the descent of the Holy Spirit, in a manner similar to what the disciples had experienced earlier in Jerusalem, confirm for Peter the rightness of the direction in which he pastorally moves. This divine affirmation spills over into Peter's words and actions to his Gentile hosts. He recognises that God embraces them

without bias. They are no longer “common” or “unclean” because of God’s action, unconstrained by human intervention or judgement. The full acceptance of these Gentile householders occurs definitively through their baptism. As Peter reminds his audience, those Jerusalem companions who have travelled with him from Joppa: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47).

In addition to Peter affirming the action of God he also attests to the presence of God among the Gentiles. He confirms God’s presence and action before his Jerusalem Jewish colleagues, those present with him in Caesarea, and, later, when he meets the leaders in Jerusalem. Despite initial criticism and opposition from the “circumcision party”, Peter continues to witness God’s action amongst the Gentiles. This conviction arises out of his reflection on the experience of what happened, his resolved perplexity over the vision of the heavenly sheet, and his affirmation of the Holy Spirit’s action upon the Gentiles. Luke describes Peter’s witness to his Jerusalem colleagues. This witness occurs, says Luke, “in order” (Acts 11:4) – a word found only one other time, in the Lukan prologue (Lk 1:3), to define an order of narrative recounting in theological rather than chronological terms. Theological meaning shapes Peter’s recount that leads him to state: “If then God gave them the same gift as God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17).

In reflecting on the qualities of an evangelising community, Pope Francis underscores the primacy of witness despite opposition and criticism, even martyrdom. His words reflect something of Luke’s presentation of Peter. According to Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, the person who witnesses “finds a way to let the word take flesh in a particular situation and bear fruits of new life, however imperfect or incomplete these may appear. The disciple is ready to put his or her whole life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, yet the goal is not to make enemies but to see God’s Word accepted and its capacity for liberation and renewal revealed” (EG 24).

Though Peter does not, at this stage anyway, undergo martyrdom, he witnesses the action of God in Jesus to the Jerusalem leaders. His witness leads to the acceptance of God’s Word revealed in the liberation and renewal of the Gentiles. This leads us to a fourth consideration.

4. *Christological.* In Peter's address to Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:34-43), two things emerge. The first is the central affirmation of the welcome that God offers all who are reverential ("fear") and live according to "what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). The second comes from this central affirmation. Peter offers a Christocentric Gospel summary that culminates in Jesus' death and resurrection, its apostolic witness and the command to preach to all about Jesus (Acts 10:36-43). Peter repeats this Christological focus later when he justifies his actions to his Jerusalem colleagues, especially the "circumcision party" who question him about his Gentile initiative. He concludes his response to his detractors by acknowledging, as noted above, God's gift shared with the Gentiles who believe in Jesus (Acts 11:17). This Christological assertion convinces his critics. They acknowledge that the Jesus movement would, in future, include Gentiles. Peter's affirmation of Jesus at the heart of his missionary engagement amongst the Gentiles anticipates what Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*: "There can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord. [...] The primacy of the proclamation of Jesus Christ in all evangelizing work" (EA 19).<sup>19</sup>

5. *"To the ends of the Earth"*. We can no longer act as missionary agents of the Gospel without serious ecological reflection and action. Pope Francis expresses a similar imperative. In his introduction to *Laudato Si*, Francis writes: "I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all...Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity. As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: 'Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation'" (LG 14).

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<sup>19</sup> The words of John Paul II are recalled by Pope Francis in EG 110.

Luke's missionary focus as expressed in Acts 1:8, reflects a geographical agenda. Current Lukan scholarship supports this interpretation. However, as contemporary disciples, we must incorporate an ecological concern into our dialogue with the world and the global ecological crisis that we experience. The mission, to the "ends of the Earth", can no longer endorse a colonialization of cultures. Rather, this expression must adopt the approach of Luke's Peter who allows himself to move into an "unclean" dislocated place and discover God already present. Luke's Peter comes to see this presence in cultures and places that are unusual or different. The consideration of "place", for contemporary interpreters, also implies ecological place. The mission "to the ends of the Earth" must allow for the inclusion of creation. The commission to preach the Good News of Jesus embraces the gift of creation that Jesus of Nazareth affirmed and healed. This becomes the explicit focus of faithful ministers and disciples of Jesus seeking to reveal Good News present in all peoples and the natural world in which people live.

## 5. Lessons Learned for Today's *Missio ad Gentes*

The narrative strategy that Luke adopts in Acts 10-11 can offer the contemporary Church a renewed understanding and approach to *missio ad gentes*. Luke's story of Peter offers insight into what the evangelist understands by mission and reveals elements necessary for relevant and authentic missionary evangelisation. A discernment of what created the shift in Luke's Peter can continue to offer fresh insight for us. Peter finally came to recognise that discipleship of Jesus was not solely a Jewish prerogative but was open to all Gentiles living in the Greco-Roman world. This spirit of openness, to engage culture and situations that seem different, if not alien, is the same spirit needed for Jesus followers in the post-modern world in a troubled, struggling, and renewing Church and at a time of ecological crisis.