

SERMON 15th May 2022, ACTS 11

By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

When I was a child, forbidden food was the box of M and M's my parents bought back from their trip to the United States. They kept it hidden in their wardrobe and would bring it out once a week as a treat for us. But there were so many packets in that box that surely they wouldn't miss the occasional one or two packets. And to my luck they didn't, I used to go into their bedroom every now and then and sneak a packet for myself. MM's hadn't reached the NZ market so they were such a treat and I'd tasted nothing like it before, you know the peanut ones with candy on the outside. It was forbidden because we were not allowed it.

In some villages in Samoa there are totem foods which cannot be eaten for example sa-le-fe'e the sacred octopus, le l'a sa the sacred fish. When the missionaries came they literally ate these sacred creatures in front of the villagers to prove to them that you will not be cursed if they ate them. Today, they remain sacred to certain villages not because they will be cursed if they ate them, but as a mark of respect to these creatures. In the village of Vaitogi in Tutuila American Samoa there is the legend of the Shark and the Turtle. One year villages near Fonuea's home suffered the effects of a great famine. Because of her blindness Fonuea was not able to find food. After many days of intense hunger, she and her daughter smelled the wonderful aroma of umu as it baked in the above ground ovens of the village. Fonuea and Salofa waited for food to be brought by villagers, but it never arrived.

The woman and her daughter were so desperate, they decided to cast their fate upon the sea. The mother took her child by the hand and together they jumped off the cliff into the surf below. As they swam to the surface, their bodies transformed. One became a turtle and the other a shark. They swam away from the villagers who did not care for them. When they arrived in Vaitogi, a village in American Samoa, they resumed their human forms. They were welcomed with food and clothing by Chief Letuli and his people. The two women were so appreciative of the chief's tender care that they vowed to return to the ocean to live just beyond the cliffs, returning when called upon to dance and entertain the villagers. They left a beautiful song with the Samoans that could be used when the shark or turtle were needed. Today, when villagers gather along the shore of that legendary site and sing the sweet melody, it is said that a turtle and a shark appear and if you stand at the cliff face and sing the song *Laume faiaga fa'asusu si ou tama* which translates as "Turtle you are too slow my baby wants milk." If you sing that song you will see the turtle and the shark swimming towards you. I have been there twice in my lifetime and have yet to see anything but the villagers and other tourists are adamant that it is a regular and common sighting. So, the turtle and the shark are sacred creatures to the village of Vaitogi.

Mircea Eliade talks about "the sacred and the profane" in Maori we would call this *tapu and noa*. His theory that *hierophanies* form the basis of religion, splitting the human experience of reality into sacred and profane or common/ordinary space and time.

In other faith traditions we have rituals that must be adhered to before one can eat certain foods for e.g. Halal meat. For Halal meat and poultry processing, the

Muslim slaughter person is required to acknowledge God's Creation and to thank God for providing sustenance by stating a prayer before each and every slaughter. Muslim slaughter folk invoke God's name before each and every slaughter with the statement, "In the name of God – God is the Greatest/*Bismillahi Allahu Akbar.*"

When I travelled to Cambodia in 2008 as part of the NZ Government Delegation for the Asia Pacific Interfaith Dialogue our group must have looked like one of those jokes you often hear about "there was a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu a Buddhist and a Christian and a Samoan one at that when we arrived at Singapore Airport. No sooner had we completed customs clearance when my interfaith fellow traveler sisters whisked me away as fast as they could. We dumped all our luggage with the men and off we ran guess where? "To McDonald's why? Because Singapore McDonalds is 24/7 Halal meat, my Muslim sister can only eat McDonald's once a week in Wellington because there is only one restaurant that serves Halal burgers on a Sunday. So, she went and ordered on our behalf we sat down to ten hamburgers for the three of us. Say no more.

What about Kosher food for the Jews? "Kosher" is a term used to describe foods that comply with dietary guidelines set by traditional Jewish law. These laws determine which foods may be consumed and how they must be produced, processed, and prepared their food the meat and the dairy products must be kept separate. For many Jews, keeping kosher is about more than just health or food safety. It is about reverence and adherence to religious tradition. They are not allowed to eat pork (see Lev 11:6-8) 7 And the pig, though it has a split hoof

completely divided, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you.

Kosher food must be prepared as outlined by the Rabbis in the Talmud. This includes slaughtering the animal in a very humane way (with a sharpened blade, from the back of the neck, and instantaneous death so no suffering occurs).

The Jews of 1st century Palestine did not mix with the Greeks and the Romans. Why not? Partly because they (the Romans) were an unfriendly foreign power that had invaded their land. Partly because they represented a style of life that threatened to corrupt their way of life and belief. The Jews were distinct in appearance and in lifestyle from their neighbours. We have all encountered these sorts of prejudices in our life times the inter-crossing of nationalities and cultures and God forbid interbreeding.

Peter has been invited to come to Cornelius' house. Peter, a strict Jew obeys the vision that has come to him and goes with his guides into unknown territory. He goes, knowingly, into a Roman captain's house. He, a Jew, goes into a Gentile home. It is hard for us to realise what a step of faith that was. (It bears some resemblance to Mary Magdalene going to the men disciples as a woman with her tremendous news. You might think of comparable modern examples of prejudice, people or places that we would not associate with.

Cornelius is a God-fearer, a seeker, attracted to the God of the Jewish faith, learning something of the background to the story of Jesus.

Jesus' ministry had been primarily to Jews but there had been some contact with Gentiles. Peter has yet to learn this for himself - how to make the transforming experience of Jesus' life, death and resurrection alive and real to this audience. He begins; "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (is not biased). Consider the depth of that affirmation. Peter's eyes had been opened. One wonders, though, how Peter can assume that the message God 'sent to the people of Israel, (the Jews), preaching peace by Jesus Christ had reached Cornelius and his companions through some Jewish community. However, Peter makes this statement of his faith and shares his understanding of Jesus' ministry, death, raising to new life and commissioning of himself and others as witnesses of all this. Here is a transformed Peter, a Peter who had to learn new lessons and take new action.

As we read about God building the church in the book of Acts what we see is that there was 'no Jew nor Greek nor Palestinian nor Arab, no rich or poor, no slave or free, no male or female, but where all are one, for all are in Christ as Christ is in all.'

So why is it then that we can eat pork after all whereas the Jews and the Muslims still treat it as an unclean animal. The Mormons don't drink coffee or anything with caffeine in it, Seventh Adventists also don't eat pork. So how come we eat all these things? Because in Peter's vision on the rooftop Jesus is saying to Peter the Jew, take eat, all that you see as once unclean, I have cleaned or cleansed. Go ahead eat. All creation everything that God has created in heaven and on earth is cleansed through Jesus Christ. Within a decade or two after the death of Jesus, some Jewish Christians abandoned the Jewish dietary regulations and thus opened the way for Gentile and Jewish Christians to eat together

Peter had a dream, it is taking the church longer than most, but we seem to be finally discovering that there is indeed no male nor female in Christ, but that women are in fact equally capable of ministry and service as are men.

For many of us the Spirit of God is still at work expanding our vision helping us to realise that young people as well as old, uneducated as well as educated, working class as well as middle class, people of all types and colours and backgrounds are all one in Christ Jesus.

What was once seen as unclean in Jewish tradition has through Christ been made clean in the Christian tradition. Some foods that were once sacred are now made ordinary. It's respecting and appreciating the difference that keeps things respectful and part of our everyday experience. Let's continue to walk gently and tread carefully around these two concepts. Amen.