



Reflection #11

There is no natural harbor on the coast of Israel. To the north is the city of Acca, which is an ancient port. Far to the south is the city of Alexandria in Egypt. Both are viable ports; both are a good distance from Jerusalem.

When the Romans conquered Palestine and made it a vassal state, the absence of a port was not acceptable to them. So they built one. You can still see the massive jetty they built to bring ships into port.

But they not only built a harbor, they also built a city called Caesarea, or “King’s Town.” Excavations of Caesarea are excellent. In the photos above you can see a dear friend, Ann Sudduth, dancing in the Mediterranean. The next photo is of the ruins of the hippodrome. Below to the left is an arch from the aqueduct, and to the right are pillars from Herod’s palace.

There is also a great amphitheater in Caesarea as well as crusader restorations of fortifications. Throughout the site are remnants of what was an amazing city. What you might miss without a bit of preparation is that none of this existed before the Romans said, “put a port in here.” It is a marvel of engineering.

This is worth a visit on its own. But Caesarea is also a very special place of pilgrimage. Caesarea is the spiritual birth place of gentiles. In Jerusalem, as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples become apostles. This moment is what we remember and celebrate as Pentecost.

In Acts 10 we find the second Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon the gentiles. Take some time to read this chapter below. Notice how the gentiles were given power through Cornelius, a Roman soldier, in Caesarea, a Roman town. Also note that it was en route to Caesarea that Simon (Peter) received the vision that all things were clean.

Mostly, though, consider the great question, “how can we withhold baptism?” The book of Acts was written as a long parable to answer such questions. Please consider part of your pilgrimage as joining in the consideration, the questions of the bible. Caesarea is a beautiful place, an engineering marvel, and a site rich in history. Yet, for us, it is also a place to ponder the moment when we were brought into a church of Jewish origins. The gentiles (read us) were given a place at the table.

This caused quite a controversy in the fledgling church. For some this was unacceptable; for others it was the whole point of the gospel. In Acts 10 there is an ancient question we are ever in need of answering anew: how are we open to the stranger, to the “other?” Was the inclusion of the gentiles a beginning and an end, or just a beginning?

When Acts was written, the church was still struggling with the question of welcoming the outsider. I believe we are still struggling with this question. In Caesarea, I hope we can hear this ancient question anew. It is a powerful place to consider a new way of looking at things. The city itself was a moment of “creation from nothing.” Is it a coincidence that this was the place where the church became something radically new?

Act 10

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.' So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.' And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

Cornelius replied, 'Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea." Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.'

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.