Piers Morgan has recently been hitting the deadlines again for offending vegans, this time for eating a Big Mac in front of an animal rights activist on live TV. This stunt was similar to a 2017 incident on Fox News when anchor Jesse Watters ate a steak while interviewing a vegan woman during an on-air segment about meat-eating.

With both Morgan and Watters being known for their gimmicks and sensationalism, surely Christian vegans don’t need to take their antics seriously? Yet, a couple of years ago, a Christian vegan friend of mine who viewed the video of Watters felt conflicted.

He agreed that Watters’ eating of a steak in front of a vegan guest on his show was discourteous but hastened to add “I think eating an animal, especially an intensively reared one, is so sad and I would never do it, but it is fine for him to eat the steak because of Acts 10 and God’s instruction that we can eat whatever we want.”

We discussed this issue more and I discovered that despite my friend’s strong moral conviction that veganism best reflected the love of God and His intentions for creation, he felt unable to stand up against the cruelty and exploitation of the meat industry.

This person understood how animals suffered within intensive animal agriculture; systems which also cause devastating environmental damage, threaten human food security and adversely affect human health, but his perception of scripture hamstrung his impulse to protest against these injustices. Yet is Peter’s vision really a divine license to kill? Let’s remind ourselves of the vision in Acts 10: 9-16

About noon the following 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 the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to
earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

These verses can be disconcerting to Christian vegans at first glance. Since scripture tells us that animals are precious manifestations of God’s love, wisdom and goodness, how are we to make sense of Peter’s vision? The truth is that Acts 10 is not a negative portrayal of animals but rather a positive depiction of God’s radical love!

First, a little background to Acts 10: there was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius who was a gentile, very devoted to God and gave generously to the poor. An angel visited Cornelius and told him to send his men to fetch Peter from Joppa.

As the men were arriving at the house where Peter was staying, Peter had his startling vision. Afterwards, while Peter was considering the meaning of the vision, God’s Spirit informed him that Cornelius’ men were on their way and that he should go with them. Peter and Cornelius’ men left together and went to meet Cornelius in Caesarea. Cornelius welcomed Peter into his house:

While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. (Acts 10: 27-28)

After considering the meaning of the vision, Peter realises it had no more to do with literal dietary instructions than Jesus’ warning about the yeast of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:6) had to do with bread! Indeed, Peter doesn’t proclaim his freedom to gobble up any animal he wishes but rather testifies in verses 34 to 36:

“I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all”

Peter’s vision wonderfully demonstrates the radical depth and inclusiveness of God’s love in a way which is easily lost on 21st century readers. The vision in Acts 10, which depicts Jewish dietary traditions as being turned upside, would have been utterly shocking to Peter. Few things could be more offensive and outrageous to a 1st century Jew! Nonetheless the imagery of the vision was used to illustrate an even more shocking truth, namely that gentiles are welcomed and embraced as God’s children through the love and work of Christ. Verses 44 to 45 describe the shocking scene that took place:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

God’s extraordinary and boundless love shocked Peter. However the shocks don’t end there! Christ’s saving work upon the cross has cosmic consequences for all of creation; humans and animals alike.
Paul explains that Christ died to “reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through the blood of His cross.” (Colossians 1: 20) God’s radically inclusive love may be shocking, but what wonderfully good news it is that God desires there to be peace and harmony between all creatures and promises to bring this about at the completion of creation. (Revelation 21: 22).

The truth revealed through the vision in Acts 10 is intended to illustrate the liberation of God’s children, not hamstring their efforts to stand up against wrongdoing. This vision reminds us that the Gospel’s message of radical love, compassion and justice is going to be an offence to some, particularly those who benefit from systems of oppression.

Perhaps this put the offence caused by Piers Morgan’s burger eating in perspective. Christ’s ministry and gospel message proved so offensive that the authorities nailed him to a cross and he was mocked with a crown of thorns. If we are to take up our crosses and follow after Christ, being an offence to others is part of this task.

But ours’ is not the offence of the oppressor but that of the disciple. Christians who speak up on behalf of animals and challenge the participation in unjust food systems which cause so much suffering, should not be ashamed of causing offence. For if, in taking a stand against cruelty, we are to suffer taunts for our efforts, let us consider such moments to be our crowns of thorns.

Unable to stand or walk, a chicken with splayed out legs sits on her stomach inside an intensive chicken farm. This is a common issue for five to six-week old broiler chickens, making it impossible for them to reach water. Photo credit: Stefano Belacchi / Equalia / We Animals Media
A pig, residing in an animal sanctuary, enjoys a pumpkin. Photo credit: Jo-Anne McArthur / Animal Equality / We Animals Media

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