

Resurrection nits Joppa

In this period following our celebration of Easter Day three weeks ago it is fitting that we should be focusing our services on the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, after all, could equally well be entitled the book of the Effects of the Resurrection, for that is what we find in it. Suddenly the explosive events that took place at a tomb outside Jerusalem early one morning are impacting upon the ancient world, echoing and reverberating and turning lives and communities upside down. The same Jesus who stepped forth from the tomb in the early hours of the first day of the week is now embodied in his disciples – disciples who had previously scattered in fear and confusion but are now scattered by the wind of the Holy Spirit, leaving a trail of healing and new life in their wake.

Last week we heard about the extraordinary conversion of perhaps the foremost enemy of the early church, Saul of Tarsus, who was transformed from prime persecutor of the first Christians into their dedicated advocate and champion. And this week we turn to the other great figure of the early church. Today our focus falls upon cowardly, headstrong, gaffe-prone Peter who had denied his Lord and run for cover just when he needed to stand firm, but who now is evidently a new man. Already we have found him standing up to the authorities who are trying to silence him, and we have found him performing miracles of healing. In other words, here in the figure of the former coward Peter we find someone in whom the new, resurrection life of the risen Christ is pulsating. Here, in Peter, we find someone in whom the power of death let loose in the world is being countered by the power of new life that is rippling out from its epicentre which is that empty tomb back in Jerusalem. And now, in today's passage, as Peter comes to a place called Joppa, the stage is set for one more encounter between life and death, one more set-piece between that dismal power that saps the world and the power of the risen One who is alive and at work in his disciples.

So, welcome to Joppa - and the sight that meets us here is a sad one indeed. It's a deeply tragic scenario as we find a community that might be described as being blighted by the power of death. As we look, we find death's calling card everywhere. To begin with, as we approach the city, we realise that someone has died for we hear the sound of weeping and the wailing. And we

quickly realise that this is not the staged, choreographed grief of professional mourners who show up at every funeral to make a racket. No, this is raw and heartfelt sorrow, for the person who has died, a woman called Tabitha in Hebrew, Dorcas in Greek and Gazelle in English, had clearly been greatly loved. But we find, furthermore, that the people who are doing the mourning are in fact widows – in other words they are people whose lives have already been struck by death. As widows they have already been robbed of their husbands, and each one of them would have had their own tragic story of bereavement to tell and that's bad enough, but there are other ways in which the pall of death hangs over their lives besides the anguish of personal loss. Widows, after all, were among the poorest and most vulnerable in society. It has been noted that in the 1st century the majority of the poor and the starving were women, especially women who had lost the one thing needful for surviving in a rigidly patriarchal system – a man. The system was stacked so that widows endured a living death, their dignity assaulted and their human worth devalued. And it seems that widows were a particular problem in the early church. Back in Acts chapter 6 we find that the church in Jerusalem faced a crisis precisely because one ethnic group felt that their widows were being neglected at the expense of another. Clearly the care of widows was an ongoing issue in the first Christian communities.

So the shadow of death hangs heavily over the lives of these women. Death clouds their lives with grief in the loss of their husbands. Death traps them in a system where they are left vulnerable and exposed, and now death has hit them again in the passing of Dorcas, their beloved friend.

And there were reasons why her death hit them so hard. You see, given that the lot of these widows was so hard, given the peril they were in once their husbands had gone, Dorcas fought back. Armed only with her needle and her thread she had taken up their cause with her good works and her charity, making tunics and cloaks and garments, ensuring that these widows were at least clothed. And that's interesting. Back in chapter 6 when the Jerusalem church faced the problem of distribution to widows they had effectively done what the church always does – the church leadership set up a committee. The leaders formed a committee of people they called deacons who were to take care of the problem. Well, Dorcas doesn't do that. She doesn't wait for some male leadership to establish a committee. She takes action. She takes the initiative, harnessing her skills to do the necessary. No wonder the widows

loved her! I imagine them now, in their grief, clutching these garments tightly, holding them to their cheeks and dabbing their tears with them, recalling the circumstances in which they were made. These garments have become sacraments. These tunics and dresses have become symbols that embody Dorcas' compassion, her steely determination, her defiance of a male, patriarchal system that marginalises widows. Her needle and thread have become her weapons against a world held captive by death. And the garments become reminders of her absence, her loss.

Of course we, from our safe 21st century perspective, can raise questions about Dorcas and the extent to which she countered the deadly system in which widows were trapped. After all, the very grief of the widows who mourn her reveals their dependence upon her. The urgency with which they send for Peter: - 'Please come to us without delay! - indicates how desperate they were. They seem lost without her! And you have to ask if that is healthy. Nowadays we might wonder what Dorcas had done to empower widows and women so that they were not so dependent upon her. However beautiful and lovingly made these tunics and garments were, I wonder what Dorcas did to teach women to make these things themselves so that they could gain some measure of independence. You know the saying: 'give someone a fish and you feed them for a day; teach them to fish and you feed them for life...' So Dorcas is described fittingly as a woman devoted to good works and acts of charity but charity by itself does not break the stranglehold of death that grips communities. People must be empowered and enabled if they are to be truly liberated.

Here, then, we have it: a community gripped by death. It's a community which has lost a loved one like a body losing a limb. It's a community of widows who have endured great trauma. It's a community threatened and undone by a deathly system that deprives people of life. But it is also a community where someone is fighting back, where someone shows compassion and initiative and is willing to put their skills and energies at the service of the community - maybe not perfectly, maybe in a flawed way that can be criticised but nevertheless in a significant way. And such a community is ripe for new life, for resurrection. It's ready for the Spirit!

So, let's notice carefully what happens next. Suddenly Peter is there and I love the way he comes to Dorcas' lifeless body and says, 'Gazelle, get up!' Now, we are told in verse 36 that Dorcas is a disciple and that's interesting.

That is the only time that word is used of a woman in the New Testament. Nowhere else is a woman described as a disciple in the New Testament. And as a disciple Dorcas therefore represents the church. She is the nucleus of the church at Joppa. So in those words, ‘Gazelle, get up!’ the church community at Joppa is being issued with an invitation to rise up. The summons to Dorcas to get up is a declaration that this little community is ready to be invaded by the Spirit, ready for new resurrection life. And no wonder the account of Dorcas’ rising is followed by these words with which our passage draws to a close: ‘This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord...’ In other words, when what had happened became known revival broke out. The church grew. It got up!

I would love to know the future of that church community in Joppa. I would love to know about its worship. I’d love to know what other signs and wonders took place there. I would love to know that the widows there formed a cooperative, dedicated to the memory of Dorcas, where they made garments and became self-sufficient. And I would love to know that they taught the men to sow and to knit and to make garments too. I would love to know that they formed a pastoral care team in memory of Dorcas that supported and prayed for those who lost loved ones. I would love to know that the women there became elders in the Consistory, the leadership team of the church. And I’d love to know that under its leadership it was a church that fed the hungry and the homeless and challenged waste and spent much time eating together.

I would love to know that the church at Joppa was filled with Dorcases, people who saw a need and who offered their skills and gifts to meet it, and who took initiatives in reaching out to the community around them. Such a church is ripe and ready for resurrection. It’s poised for new life that challenges a world in thrall to death. Maybe there is a word here for us on this Sunday when we hold our Annual General Meeting and review our life as a church. Maybe there is a vision here for us in our life together. Amen.

O holy and gracious God
we worship you, we praise your holy name.
We bow before you, who in Jesus Christ
has burst out of the tomb,
leaving behind a pile of grave clothes,
discarding the bindings of death that wrapped your body.
And we come before you with joy,
putting on our garments of praise,
wrapped in you love and goodness to us.
Yet we confess that we come to you

with lives that are faded and threadbare,
worn by all our failures and compromises.
We confess the sin that clings and binds us
constraining us and gripping us.
Hear us as we confess to you all that is wrong in us.
O God, cover our sin and our guilt.,
Reclothe us with the fabric of your grace and mercy.
Remove our sackcloth and clothe us with the robe
with which you adorn your beloved children
And we pray all these things in the name of
Your Son, our saviour, in whose words we pray together,
Saying...

O loving God,
as we think of that community at Joppa
in their grief, we pray for those who mourn today,
for those who have lost loved ones,
those who suddenly find themselves without
people upon whom they depended and relied.
O God in this Easter season especially bring
comfort and strength to the bereaved and the grieving.

And we think of those we know in that situation today...
And God as we think of those vulnerable widows in Joppa,
we think of other vulnerable women,
for those abused by harmful relationships
and by domestic violence.
O God may they find support and courage.
And God as we think of that church community at Joppa
on this Sunday of our Annual General Meeting
we pray especially for this church:
for its leadership, its elders and all those
entrusted with special tasks and responsibilities,
for its musical life and all who contribute to that
and for its many activities.
O God may it be a place of spiritual growth,
where we learn what it means to be
a community that is rising to new life.
As Dorcas used her gifts for the good of others
help us so to do.
Unlock we pray the abilities that you have given us
and make us generous in our sharing of them
for the upbuilding of your church.
And bless, we pray, the community in which we are set.
We pray for the Begijnhof and the Roman Catholic chapel
opposite our doors and for father Pieter,
for the churches on the Spui with which we are linked.
May we together offer a united witness to the world
that will bring you honour and glory.
We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.