

Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17

12.05.19

*A death in the family*

The season of Easter continues and in our reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles the power of the risen Lord is rippling though the ancient world. Our passage takes us to a place called Joppa where we are told of the death of a much-loved seamstress called Dorcas. And we are told of the grief of the community there at her passing, and especially a group of widows who were no strangers to death and loss and who seem to have been especially close to Dorcas. Then we read of Peter entering the upstairs room where Dorcas is laid, sending everyone else out. And we imagine Peter alone in that room with the body of Dorcas. The late, great Irish poet Seamus Heaney wrote a poem called *Funeral Rites*, set in the context of the troubles in Northern Ireland. In it he imagines himself lifting the coffins of dead relations:

They had been laid out  
 in tainted rooms,  
 their eyelids glistening,  
 their dough-white hands  
 shackled in rosary beads...

Their puffed knuckles  
 had unwrinkled, the nails  
 were darkened, the wrists  
 obediently sloped.

Maybe that is how it was for Dorcas, without the rosary beads of course. But suddenly her eyelids are open, her dough-white hands are moving, wrists reaching out as new life pulses through this body. And then the widows are singing as joy comes to Joppa.

The passage describes the death of a strong and much-loved woman and this is a very appropriate text for this Sunday, for in recent days our church here has lost two strong and much-loved women: this week our dear Lotte passed away, the same week in which we laid to rest José, another stalwart of our church. And because funerals don't come often to this congregation, thankfully, I thought that this passage might afford an opportunity for us, especially in this Easter season, to reflect a little on death and funerals and what we are doing in them.

And the question I want to consider this morning is ‘who is the funeral for?’ Where is the focus of the funeral service? Is it all about the deceased, the person who has passed away? Or is it for those who are left behind, the loved ones and the mourners? And I would suggest that there is rather more to this than meets the eye and that in fact the funeral is in fact aimed in four directions.

So firstly, at least for the Christian church, the funeral service is for God – or, put better, it is first and foremost an offering of worship. For the Christian church the funeral service is an act of praise and not primarily a celebration of the departed or an act of pastoral care for the mourners. So the first priority is gratitude to God and the proclamation to the world of Christ’s triumph over death - as reflected in this story by the raising of Dorcas. And here I want us to notice an important shift in our understanding and practice of funerals in recent times. If we were to go back to the Reformation in the 16th century, when various distortions of the medieval Roman Catholic church were being corrected, the whole service would have focused on God and the promise of resurrection. Nothing would have been said about the deceased. That was not the focus. Nowadays, however, a huge amount of attention is paid to the deceased. People give eulogies and tributes. A person might choose favourite hymns for their funeral or, more likely in this secular age, favourite songs or music. I gather that – at least until recently – the favourite songs that accompanied people out of this world were Frank Sinatra’s *My Way* and, at least with cremations, so I’m told, ‘*Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*’. In previous eras however this was not how it was done. The funeral was not the celebration of the life of the person who had died, it was a celebration of the Gospel. It was worship.

I am reminded of the Book of Job in the Old Testament which tells of how a man called Job lost all his loved ones in one tragedy after another, and when all this has been recounted we read, ‘then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped.’ And of course Job didn’t know anything about the resurrection of the dead or of new life beyond this one, yet in the face of death he worshipped God. And how much more should we who believe in the risen Lord? And of course it’s hard – very hard – when the deceased is young or the death has been cruel and it may take a long time to get there, but ultimately the Christian response to death is to worship the God who has defeated it. That is the primary purpose of the funeral.

But what, then, of the deceased? How do they figure in a funeral? In what sense is the funeral for him or her? And this is where we might see a legitimate correction to the Reformation practice. Yes, sure, the funeral is directed to God – but that need not exclude the deceased. The funeral can also be a celebration of the gift of this life that has been given by God. And it's beautiful that in our reading the widows were getting out tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made because these were almost like sacraments – tangible embodiments of life, repositories of memories, symbols of who she was. And while the proclamation of the resurrection is common to all Christian funerals and in that regard there is a 'one size fits all', yet at the same time this is not just anyone who has passed on: this is Dorcas, this is Lottie, this is José, and every life is unique and the funeral must be theirs. And, let's face it, sometimes it can be difficult to know what to say about the deceased, when the memories they leave behind are not good. People sometimes complain that the person described at a funeral is not the person they knew and a very varnished and dishonest picture is presented. And here we tread on sensitive ground, but the bottom line is that in a funeral a person is named as a unique child of God fashioned in God's image and they are committed to the justice and mercy and grace of God.

And this personal dimension of a funeral is important for another reason. You see, all of us find it hard to come to terms with our deaths. We are all in some degree of denial. Most of us somehow think that we will get out of here alive, and many of us harbour deep anxieties about death. And one of the things that can help me come to terms with my death is the knowledge that my parting will be marked by a dignified and fitting ritual, one that will do justice to my mortal life and bring fitting closure to it. And even in cases where a body is unidentified and its identity unknown and where no relative or loved one is known yet still the church would give a respectful funeral – in recognition that this is a unique human life which bears the image of God.

So the funeral service is for God and for the deceased. But in the case of the death of a church member the funeral service is also very much for the church community. After all, within the church we are bound together with one another in a very special bond, the Holy Spirit. And that is actually an even deeper bond than family ties of flesh and blood. And we might think of those widows grieving Dorcas in Acts as sisters in Christ grieving a fellow sister and that adds another dimension to their grief. And you know the saying: you can

choose your friends but you can't choose your family, and church is family, and as in all families we disagree with one another and we fall out and there are conflicts and tensions, but the bottom line is we are brothers and sisters, the body of Christ. And as in any body when one member suffers the whole body suffers and when one member dies the whole body is bereaved. And so at a fellow church member's funeral, even if we did not know them well, we join together in loyalty and solidarity and together we acknowledge our loss. And the funeral is therefore for the church, the family of God.

But then of course the funeral is also for all loved ones of the deceased, for flesh and blood family and friends. And returning to the way funerals were once viewed, there has been a clear shift in recent times from worship to therapy. What I mean is that in an increasingly secular and therapeutic society we are at pains to help people to cope with life and death. And funerals are increasingly less about worship and more about dealing with grief, coming to terms with loss, helping people 'to move on'. And some might see this as typical of the way that God is being increasingly marginalised and displaced. But not necessarily. If we put the worship of God and the proclamation of the resurrection first, then surely a funeral can also be viewed as having genuine pastoral, therapeutic value. The funeral, after all, with its ritual, is one step in the process of coming to terms with loss. It is a step in the grieving process and an important one. People who are closest to the deceased and most affected by their death often recall little of the funeral service. They are somewhere else. Yet somehow the service still touches them, and the Spirit of God is present in worship to bless and to heal. And a good funeral can be an important step in the journey of bereavement. And I spoke earlier of when memories left by the departed are not good, and when they leave behind tangled and unresolved relationships and that can be hard. But the funeral can be a step towards letting go – letting go of the deceased but also letting go of hurts and anger. It can be a step on the road to closure.

So on that day in Joppa, in the upstairs room in the house of a woman named Dorcas we can discern the ingredients of a good funeral. There's the worship and praise of God, and the celebration of a life, and the grief and support of fellow believers and loved ones. And in the words of our reading from the Book of Revelation which are read at many Christian funerals, our hope for the departed is that

'the lamb who is at the heart of

the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to the springs  
of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear  
from their eyes. 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 the 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...