

**Not dead yet**

*Acts 9:36-43; John 20:22-30*

In the course of being a parish minister I find myself with people at the very high points and the very low points of life. The baptisms and the weddings; the school services with hundreds of children; the dignified communions; the sad but positive service and events we had at the closing of the Guild here a few weeks ago; the social events for which our congregation is rightly renowned. All times when there is a spirit of thanksgiving, fun, joy, grace that you can't quite put your finger on but you know it when you see it and feel it. At such times, God is near.

That's equally true in the lower points in life. The times of depression and brokenness, when all that can be done is to sit alongside and listen. The times of hurt and betrayal, when all that can be done is to sit alongside and listen. The times of disappointment and failure, when all that can be done is to sit alongside and listen. And the times of bereavement.

Over the years of ministry a handful of occasions come to mind when I have been privileged, and it is a privilege, to be with people close to the end of their lives. There is sadness, sometimes regret, even anger. Often there is peace, but those special memories are bound up with a slight touch of humour. Visiting an older lady in one of the hospices in Edinburgh, it was clear that the end was near. As I often do, I sat beside the bed and gently held the persons hand and said a quiet prayer. I tend not to close my eyes but look at the person I'm praying with, believing that even if not able to speak, a dying person can still hear. That's worth remembering. As I came to the end of the prayer the lady opened her eyes, smiled weakly, and whispered, 'Not dead yet.' It was a lovely moment and I laughed out loud, and wondered how often, with death so near, laughter was heard, and the voice not of fear, but of faith, could be heard too.

The story from Acts is not an easy one because it deals with life and death, because it deals with miracle. Most of us have adjusted our lives to the go-along and get-along ways of the world. Almost everyone agrees that we live in a secular age. In this world belief in God cannot

be taken for granted. We live and move and have our being in communities inhabited by people we now and respect who do not share our faith claims. In such a context it is not easy for us to sustain our faith.<sup>i</sup>

To enter into the world described in the Book of Acts does not mean we have to leave our brains at the door, but it is necessary to accept the assumption that God is still working in the world through God's Spirit in the lives of people and in human society. God's motivation is to be present, and to restore our broken world. God's motivation is to remind us that through life, and through death, God is still there. Not dead yet.

The story of Talitha, or Dorcas (the word means gazelle) is a lovely little insight not only into the early Christian Church, but also into the belief that through life, and through death, God is still with us. Dorcas was a disciple, in fact, she's the only woman in the whole of the New Testament called a disciple. Dorcas was a woman who was a widow. In her day women were not valued by the culture at large, and widows had no one to stand up for them so they lived on the margins of society. Dorcas didn't let that hold her back. She set about performing works of kindness and charity. She was a woman who served others. She helped the poor in her community of Joppa, (the ancient port of Jaffa on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean; the modern city of Tel Aviv is built beside it today). Dorcas, probably in defiance of custom and tradition, was taking a leading role in her church, another way in which God uses what is lowly and despised in the world to turn the world upside down. Dorcas, probably not well off herself, helps the poor around her. She makes coats and garments for them. They are the tangible evidence of her life. And then she dies.

Now the most vulnerable ones have no one. Dorcas, poor as she was like the rest of the widows she helped, was too busy getting on with doing good and surviving from day to day to worry about theology, or life after death. Her priority was survival and to help others. Dead or alive, her faith was one that lived out loud that phrase, 'Not dead yet'. While there was still breath in her body, while her hands could still work and move and make things, she did what she could for those less fortunate than herself. With Dorcas gone, how would the poor survive?

But death is not to be the last word. Luke explains nothing in his telling of what happened when Peter went to visit Dorcas. But the one who appeared to be dead was not dead yet. Her story continued.

It is as mysterious as the other healing miracles in the gospels. It is as mysterious as the Lazarus story. It is as mysterious as the resurrection of Jesus at Easter. I suspect the point is for us not to get caught up in the mechanics of resurrection, or healing. It is to look at what is being affirmed. God's presence in the time of death. And also, the things that are important in the unfolding of God's Kingdom are to continue. What is important in this story is that there is power at loose. There is power in the name of Jesus Christ. There is power in the name of the ones who follow Him.

Every community, every family, every congregation exists within certain settled, fixed arrangements of power and weakness, life and death. Dorcas as a widow should have stayed at home and let the men set up a welfare system for the poor, and have died quietly and unnoticed. Peter should have stayed at Capernaum with his fishing nets and leave theology to scholars. To take that route would be to give up on life, and if you give up on life, you give up on faith.

But the good news is, we're not dead yet!

Sure, Dorcas, and Lazarus, and Peter, would all die at some point, but when there was work yet for them to do, life was given. Not dead yet.

Sure, there are those who confidently predict the death of God, the end of the Church, the disappearance of people of faith, but there is work yet to do, and life is given. Not dead yet.

So Dorcas will not live forever. This is not her day to die, or at least to remain dead, but Dorcas is not immortal in her earthly pilgrimage. Peter will not return another time to revive her. Even Peter will not live forever. That's not what resurrection life is about. The promise given to the community of faith reading this story is to focus on life, and how it is lived.

What was Dorcas doing that was so important? She was helping the poor and the troubled and the ignored. What was Peter doing that was so important? He was getting alongside people in need and speaking words of comfort and understanding. God did the rest.

And God does the rest now. Things may be tough for you at home, or at work. Things are tough in the political life of our country, and our continent. Things are tough for the Church as she adapts, yet again, to the changes in society. But, by the grace of God, we're not dead yet. And while there is life, there is hope. And when the time comes to die, as it does to all, that hope continues, as we move from one existence to another, still trusting and still serving our Lord. As Easter memories fade, the long, steady journey of faith continues. We're not dead yet, so live, live out loud, the life of faith God has given to you!

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Joseph S Harvard, Feasting on the Word Year C, vol2, pps426, 428