

Devoted

Psalm 23; Acts 9:36-43

I was many years into ministry before I noticed that there was a strong emphasis on the Book of Acts in the weeks that followed after Easter. I wonder if it is because, after the momentous events of Easter itself, we are supposed to think long and hard about the impact those events on the lives of the ordinary people of those days. What difference did the continuation of the story of Jesus in the life of women and men make?

Last week, Saul of Tarsus and Ananias. This week Tabitha, or Dorcas. In their different ways they all represent something important about the people who are part of our Christian heritage. They are people whose stories of lived faith say something to us today.

The name Tabitha, or Dorcas, means gazelle in both Aramaic and Greek, but its other root meaning is 'gracious'. The fact that we are told her name in the two different languages is quite probably an indication that this woman's good nature and charitable giving was well known throughout every part of the community. What a wonderful reputation to have. She lived in the port city of Joppa, now absorbed into modern Tel Aviv.

Tabitha was also a disciple of Jesus. It's one of the few times, if not the only one, when a woman is actually called 'disciple'. Again, what a wonderful reputation to have!

What we find in this little, often over-looked story, is a community devastated by a bereavement. One of the pillars of the community and Church, Dorcas, had fallen ill and died. Every church I have ever known has at least one, and often several, of these women. Dorcas' ministry was to make tunics and clothing for the widows in the community. In ancient, patriarchal times, widows normally held no status in society. Unless they had family, they were often amongst the poorest. It's why the Bible often has injunctions about people of faith making sure that they ought to care for the widows and orphans. They are then, and remain, amongst the most vulnerable in our communities and world.

In her community and church Dorcas supported vulnerable souls with her love and devotion. "She was full of good works and acts of charity." It says something that such was the grief that

Peter, visiting a nearby community of Christians, was sent for to see if he could do something? What did people expect? Share the grief? Say a few comforting words at the funeral? When he arrived the many who had been helped by Dorcas brought the garments, emblems of her devotion, to show Peter. "This is what she did, this is what she was like, look, see!" When Jesus raised Lazarus, we don't read about paeans of praise about his character or economic output.

It's interesting to see how this vulnerable congregation at Joppa stood together – weeping together, hoping together, and celebrating together. Here is a gathering of believers who looked out or each other and supported each other. In the world in which we live, so often individualistic and isolated and introspective, we might want to remind ourselves that one of the joys of who we are what we can be is about this kind of gathering, where people are known and welcomed and included and supported. This story is a challenged to the intense privacy and individualism that are too often the cultural icons of our day. There is a tendency within many of us, when facing a crisis or catastrophe, to pull up our emotional drawbridge, to go quiet and private. When it comes to being the Church, the human reaction tends to be at odds with the holy best. We grit our teeth, we clench our fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst. We are so often unable or unwilling to let something be done for us and in us. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life against being helped and transformed by the love of others, and maybe even the love of God. The 'don't be beholden to anyone' attitude? The, 'I don't want to be a bother to anyone' response? Sound familiar to you? It does to me.

Whatever happened, when Peter visited Dorcas and sat with her, and we cannot pretend to understand or explain it, Dorcas is brought back to life, and I rather hope continued for a time with her good works and acts of charity.

It's those actions that I want to concentrate upon, and in particular that description that she was full of good works and acts of charity, or in another translation, "devoted..."

"Devoted." It has a slightly old-fashioned, sentimental feel to it. But it's a word that plays out in our contemporary world. The devoted husband, wife, son, daughter. The devoted mother or father. The devoted church member. Devotion – loving, loyal, caring, dependable, faithful. There

is an outward focus to being devoted. There is inevitably a kind of reaching out when you are devoted, taking into consideration the needs and well-being of others, how they are feeling, how they are doing. And then, in devotion, doing something about that to help and support and accompany and appreciate.

Some look at the story of Greyfriars' Bobby as an emblem of devotion in Edinburgh: the little Skye terrier who guarded the grave of his owner in the Greyfriars' Kirkyard for fourteen years. But devotion is so much more than merely the response of a little dog. It has a human counterpart, for which we should be grateful, and to which we might aspire.

Who are the people whose devotion to you, or to some good cause, rocks your world, shapes your life, gives you comfort, inspires your world-view? Where is Dorcas to be found in in our church today? Is she in the kitchen making coffee, or running Sunday Club and creche, or preparing to help with Morningside Hope over the next few weeks, or ensuring that some of the unglamorous but necessary work of our Church life is going to be dealt with? It doesn't take long to realise very quickly that Dorcas is in so many areas of our church's life, and in the life of charities the length and breadth of Edinburgh, and across the whole country. Our world would collapse if Dorcas in her many guises was not at work in every area where good works and acts of charity take place, with her devotion to people in need, and good causes, and those who needed a friendly listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on, or a community to be helped, or little acts of kindness to be performed that might never make the headlines, but, my God, what a difference they make to people like you and me, and to so many, many others.

So often in the Bible, as in life, we become transfixed by the sparkly headlines. And yes, I suppose the reviving of a dead woman would grab your attention. But look behind and beyond the story. It's about an ordinary life of devotion. It's about kindness put into practice. It's about looking out for the vulnerable and providing for the needs of those on the edges of society. It's about doing your little bit and making a difference where you can.

Looking out for Dorcas, the female and male versions. Out there in our world. Around us in our lives. Devoted. Caring. Loyal. Generous. Outward looking. Concerned for others. Doing what they can. Making our Church and our world a much better place than we could ever hope. Then

consider in your own life and the way you live it – where are the Dorcas opportunities for you in this coming week.

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

Amen