

SERMON – 8 MAY 2022 – Acts 9.36-end, John 10.22-30

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're in the earliest years of the Christian church – actually, we're before that. The first reading is Acts chapter 9, and it isn't until Acts chapter 11 that the believers are first called “Christians”. But we're here in Joppa, on the coast of Israel, Joppa is Jaffa (where the oranges come from, as they say) – about 40 miles from Jerusalem.

Tabitha, Dorcas, a disciple – one who follows the teaching of Jesus Christ. It's fascinating to wonder how she became a disciple. Did she listen to Jesus when he was in the wilderness, was she there at the Sermon on the Mount? Or was she in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, did she see them speaking in tongues, did she hear Peter preach –

‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ... In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

She may not have been a man of Judea, but was that when she realised the power of God, believed in Jesus, and received the Holy Spirit? Now she's in Joppa – doing “good works and acts of charity.”

Men and women have always done “good works and acts of charity”, and there are smashing men and women, of all faiths and none, who love and care for their fellow human beings. But I am probably right in saying that every world faith includes the need to do acts of charity, because however much we like to believe human beings are naturally loving and good, experience proves otherwise. So religion is one of those things which is a spur towards doing good, towards caring for your fellow human beings.

I was at a conference the Wednesday before last – the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance. Quite a lot of important people there, Chief Executive of English Heritage, head of Property for the Church of England, and church people from across the country. It was incredibly positive. Our work has been noticed during these Covid times – the powers that be, the Government, local authorities, have realised anew that religious people and the work they do is something to be celebrated and encouraged. That was good to hear.

It was also interesting that one thing that has come out of the last two years is apparently that the Government, the Treasury, have realised the economic value

of faith communities, the economic value of these buildings and the work that goes on inside them. Don't ask me how they have come to this figure, but apparently Society benefits to the tune of £55 billion a year because of places of worship. That is our charitable work, the food banks we run, it is the money we save the State by helping people with their mental health, it is the economic boost we give to our communities – think how much the community of Derby will benefit financially from the 15 weddings our two churches host this year, the overnight accommodation, the money spent in the pub and on the reception, the florist, the suit hire, the car hire. Now we don't offer weddings for financial return, but the bean counters in Government have woken up to our value – and, in a world where finance matters, the fact that we have a financial benefit to the State helps our case for grant funding, VAT relief and everything else.

And we don't just benefit this country. Starting next Sunday tens of thousands of church people across this country will be involved in Christian Aid Week. If you are – thank you, and thank you to Geoff Bailey here, and Diane Whittaker at St Matthew's, for doing the organising. Covid has changed the way we do the collections, but the work is still done – men, women and children benefit from our charity, our love, our giving.

From the earliest days of the church good works and acts of charity have been a mark of a caring Christian community – how many Tabithas have there been over the centuries?

But in Joppa Tabitha, Dorcas, has died. Probably nothing unusual – I always picture her as an older lady, like so many old ladies I've known. I forget that as I come up to my 60th birthday I am probably much older than she was. She dies – nothing unusual in that, we cope when one of our own dies, we celebrate their life, you can imagine the eulogy that was being written for Tabitha.

Yet in Joppa, the death of a member of your church community was unusual – because she was probably the first. And this is not supposed to happen. Jesus is the Messiah, he has died, and risen again, and the Kingdom is coming. He had talked about a disciple not seeing death until it came, and yet here in Joppa, a disciple has died. It should not be like this – she cannot die before the Messiah has returned, before God's Kingdom is installed on earth. No doubt the congregation are frightened – if Tabitha can die, then presumably, so can we. Yet our new faith is supposed to free us from the pains of death. If Tabitha can die before the Messiah comes, is he coming? What does it mean that we live in the Kingdom of God if illness and death are still part of life?

The sheer practicalities – what do we do? Do we go the synagogue and ask the rabbi to bury her, the church hadn't invented people with dog collars who can

come and take a service. Help! Peter the Apostle is in Lydda, just 11 miles away from Joppa – go and get him.

I do find it quite amusing that when Peter arrives he doesn't do what I'd do, or what any religious leader would do, which is help them plan a funeral, help them grieve – no Peter does what Jesus did, he brings her back to life! That speaks volumes about his power, that speaks volumes about the power that Christ has over death – but I wonder what Tabitha felt. Had she reached heaven, had she found the peace of being in God's Kingdom, and then was she sent back? Who knows? In my 21st century belief system I struggle with the idea that anyone can come back after death – and I always find these stories hard, because people I would love to have here alive with me, are separated from me by death, and no one can bring them back. And yet, there is a power here, and I must recognise that power.

I do wonder what happened next time someone from Joppa died. One hopes that the community had had more time to get their head round the fact of death, that the good works and acts of charity were there to help someone grieve. I know how much 'good work and charity' were directed our way when we walked through the valley of the shadow of death – it got to the stage where if anyone one else from the church had turned up on the doorstep with a casserole I would have screamed. But I will be eternally grateful for that love – and we seek to show it when we support others. I hope that when Tabitha died a second time, she died with confidence that the best is yet to come – and that she worships with us, on another shore and in a greater light.

The reading from John's gospel has Jesus telling us that we are his. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." No one, the devil, the power of evil, the power of death, no one – nothing – can separate us from the love of God.

It is a huge thing that we proclaim – that we dare to believe that death is not the end. That goes against the reality – when we watch someone take their last breath, death is death. Our churchyards are full of graves – and, up until the last century, most people in our villages had a lot of personal experience of death. When there is a lot of death, you have to work out what you believe, you have to work at how you're going to cope. Faith has often been the response – and one of the reasons people in our society today don't worry so much about faith is because they don't have to. When life is good, when you've packed a lot in – then you, and the people around you, feel that you don't really need to worry about what comes next.

One of the great sadnesses of covid has been the decline in the number of funerals I have taken – I have no doubt that all the afternoon TV adverts for

“simplicity cremations” and similar companies, adverts telling you you don’t need a funeral – all the restrictions that have been put on – the way most undertakers have their own funeral celebrants who they want to use, much easier than involving a local Vicar – all of these things have taken the church out of death and dying. I do think that in some ways the Church of England only has itself to blame – if we stop welcoming people for baptisms and weddings (and very few churches put as much effort into them as we do), if we withdraw in on ourselves, catering only for our members, is it any wonder that the wider community ignores us, even when they face death.

But before I spend all my time criticising others, I wonder how much better our understanding of death and eternal life is than the understanding that those around us seem to have – what does our faith say about the end of this life?

We are all making a journey – a journey through this world, and I don’t believe it finishes when we take our final breath. I do believe that somehow, on whatever lies ahead, I will see those I love again. I do believe I will see my Lord. I try not to be afraid, but a bit of me is. So we journey together, know that from the earliest days of the church, friends journey with us – and they love and care for us.

PB 060522