
In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died... When Peter arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made. Peter got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." ... This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord From Acts 9:36-43

Grace and peace to you.

As Christian people we sometimes do not always appreciate the value of the words and phrases given to us from God in the Bible. Take, for example, the great triad in First Corinthians Chapter 13, verse 13: "Faith, hope, love."

We know that these are really 'big words' that relate to concepts important to all people. Take, for example, this weekend as 'Mothers' Day'. With regards to 'faith' and 'hope' we always wish to be able to have true 'faith' and 'hope' in relation to family relationships, and the people important to us. Obviously, we also seek to experience 'love' from such people, as we also wish to give appropriate 'love' as well. Think of how 'faith', 'hope' and 'love' have been important in your personal life, family life, community life, church life, and so many other ways.

As we also think of our own lives, we can see how importantly needed is 'faith', 'hope', and 'love' in many conflicts that exist around the world. People going through 'dark times' need to have some form of 'faith and 'hope'. And they wish to know they are truly 'loved' and cared for. Our prayers are also for those who perpetuate violence that hearts can be changed by a proper sense of 'faith, and 'hope', and 'love'. And this leaves a question: how are we (you) praying for those in the world, and those around you, that they are filled with a proper sense of 'faith' and 'hope' and 'love' as is so willed and directed by God (as revealed in His Word)?

As we come to this weekend (Fourth Sunday after Easter – "Good Shepherd Sunday") we are rejoicing in the gift of life and love God has given us in Jesus. He is our 'Good Shepherd' who laid down His life for the sheep that's us – see Gospel for today, John 10:22-30). Today I wish to particularly reflect upon the topic, "What is faith? How is 'faith' to affect my life?" 'Faith' is an important topic to all of us, and it informs how we see the themes of 'hope' and 'love'. We all need 'faith'.

To have a successful marriage, a husband and wife need to have 'faith' in one another. For a sporting team to be successful, from administration, to coaching staff, to players: all need to have 'faith' that one another will 'work together as a team'. 'Faith' is important in business. 'Faith' is important in life.

For many people, 'faith' is also like a 'power' that exists within a person that 'If you believe you can do it, then you can: anything is 'possible' if you believe". But is life really like this? If I believe in my mind I can 'fly', then can I throw myself off a 20 story building? Just because we believe something is so doesn't make it true!

In the Steve Martin movie 'Leap of Faith' there is an excellent reflection on the theme of 'faith'. Steve Martin plays a character called 'Jonas Nightingale'. Jonas belongs with travelling group that moves from town to town performing 'faith healing'. When one of the buses breaks down they stop in a small country town where they set up 'business'. Many of the company drift into the coffee shops and restaurants listening to people's stories. Once the show began, one of the producers in the background (Debra Winger's character: Jane) feeds information into an earpiece (eg: "Woman in red, sixth row aisle seat... has back problems"). Carefully selecting people who 'believe', many come forward and testify to being 'healed'. However, the local sheriff (Will Braveman, played by Liam Neeson) doesn't like this – particularly when Jonas starts taking an interest in a waitress (Marva) who has a brother (Boyd) who is significantly crippled in his legs (he walks with braces).

Boyd (who had been to 'faith-healers' but told he 'Didn't have faith') takes a shine to Jonas. Jonas, however, tries to gently (without revealing their scam) lead him away from such hopes. The town is in severe drought. The sheriff reveals Jonas' 'conman past'. Jonas acknowledges he is a 'changed man' (and in a dialogue with the sheriff essentially says, "What's wrong with what we do: we're selling people hope?). More and more people attend each gathering in their four day visit. However, as the show is reaching its end, Boyd comes forward on stage (in spite of Jonas' efforts to initially stop him). However, as Boyd walks toward Jonas the braces fall off and he can walk again. The producers think this is part of the show. The people think that Boyd is healed. And Jonas is shocked because he knows it is a real miracle. That night Jonas sneaks off and hitches a ride in a truck, and as he leaves another 'miracle' occurs, and he concludes by saying, "Thank-you Jesus". Where is 'real faith'? For me, it is when Jonas snuck out of town....

In the healing of Tabitha we also see a miracle of 'real faith'. Tabitha's name is also 'Dorcas' (which means 'gazelle', implying 'graceful'). She is described as a 'disciple' (the only woman to actually have this adjective applied to her name). She lived in Joppa, a village on the coast some 60 kms north-west of Jerusalem. This was often seen as the edge of 'pagan territory'. Peter was some 12 to 15 kms away at Lydda, and he had been involved at the healing of man (Aeneas: Acts 9:34). When Dorcas died the people at Joppa sent for Peter. When Peter arrived we have one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible: (Acts 9:39) "All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them."

By reflecting on this, the widows were essentially saying, “Here was a ‘woman of faith’.” Then Peter did something unusual. He sent them out of the room. And then he said to her (in Aramaic it would be *Tabitha koum*: which parallels Jesus’ word in Mark 5:41 to the little dead girl: ‘*Talitha koum*’). And then he presented her to the people. As a result of this, in this essentially ‘Gentile’ area, many people came to believe in Jesus. But there are some important things we need to keep in mind when reflecting on faith.

First, in the Bible (OT and NT!) there are only ten accounts of people being raised from the dead. In the ‘Old Testament’, there are three accounts: (1) Elijah and the widow of Zarepath’s son (1.Kgs.17:17-24); (2) Elisha and the Shunamite’s son (2.Kgs.4:20-37), and (3) the man tossed into Elisha’s tomb (2.Kgs.13:21). In the Gospels there are three accounts of Jesus raising people from the dead: (1) the widow’s son at Nain (Lk 7:11-16); (2) Jairus’ 12-year-old daughter (Mk 5:35-43), and (3) Lazarus (Jn.11:1-44). In Acts there are two accounts: (1) Tabitha (with Peter: Acts 9), and; (2) Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12, with Paul). Then there are the people raised upon Jesus’ death (Matt.27:51-53). And then there is Jesus Himself (although this is different. It is not simply a revivification, but a resurrection to a completely new life).

Furthermore, there are only 37 accounts of individuals being healed – in the Gospels and Acts! (This, of course, does not exclude the ‘many’ identified as being healed when Jesus was present, but only 37 are recorded in any detail). And 15 of these (almost half) occurred when no one else was present. And, in many of these cases (healings, and certainly being raised from the dead) it was not the people who asked for this to happen, but someone else.

All this says that it is not ‘faith’ itself that heals, but Jesus. ‘Faith’, in and of itself, is useless without an ‘object of faith’. It is not what you ‘believe’, but it is what is ‘true’ that really matters. And whether you ‘believe’ in something or not does not really matter – if the ‘object’ of such ‘belief’ is not ‘true’.

So, what do we learn from the miracle of the restoration of Dorcas to the church on earth?

First, we are to remember that Jesus is the great ‘healer’, and not our ‘faith’. Our ‘faith’ is not in our own ‘selves’, or our ‘abilities’, but in Jesus. He is the true source of ‘faith’. He is the true source of ‘hope’. He is the true source of love. And the ‘healing’ Jesus sought to bring was a ‘healing of the soul’. This is not to say that physical healing miracles are not ‘possible’. But if you go looking for them, you are looking for the wrong sort of ‘faith’. Jesus brings a deeper healing of the soul through His cross, and through His resurrection to ‘new life’ (see also Romans 6, etc). As we think of the raising of Tabitha, we also need to remember that Tabitha had to face death yet again. But greater ‘healing’ (as seen in the healing of the paralytic man: Luke 5:20) is the gift of the healing of the soul. We have ‘healing of the soul’ in Jesus...

Second, and most obvious, Tabitha's death means that one day we need to be ready for death. When the people called for Peter, no one asked for Tabitha to be raised from death. But she was. And as a result of this, many people came to believe that Jesus gives eternal life. But an actual revival from the dead does not always 'produce faith' (as the raising of Lazarus testifies: many saw it, but they wanted to put Jesus to death!) Therefore, Tabitha's revival led to many people believing in Jesus, and for us it serves as a reminder of the certainty of eternal life in the power of God at work in her. We have eternal life in Jesus...

Third, and very importantly, the bringing back from death of Tabitha reminds us of the need of a 'practical Christianity'. It's not just what you say, but also what you 'do' that matters. What did the widows do when Peter arrived? "All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them." (cf. 'Dorcas ministries' in many church groups). A practical faith (a 'lived faith') makes an enormous difference to the world

The great thing we are reminded of in the raising of Dorcas is the 'joy of faith', that comes from 'the joy of knowing Jesus'. There is a quote often seen in homes in our world: "Dance as though no one is watching you, Love as though you have never been hurt before, Sing as though no one can hear you, Live as though heaven is on earth." We note that this quote is from a non-Christian origin, but with a focus on Christ, a whole new dimension. The great gift received in the revival of Dorcas was not a 'gift' for Dorcas (who had eternal life), but a gift for the church. And that 'gift' is to know Jesus. This is what faith is all about, knowing Jesus.

One can focus on the incredible miracle of reviving Tabitha from death. But our real focus is what God has done for us in Jesus that gives us a true sense of 'faith' and 'hope' and 'love'.

In the first century context, this miracle was a demonstration of the power of life over death. This power still exists today. It is this power that gives Christians hope; a blessed assurance that we live to live again. But perhaps even more so than the hereafter, this resurrecting power should flame the fire of our desire to create a more loving and just world. Like Tabitha, we devote our lives to good works and acts of love. We should live a life that sounds the alarm, alerting the world that there is a God who is willing and able to act on our behalf. This loving and just God continues to resurrect death "things."

In these weeks after Easter, it may be that our wonder over the resurrection may have abated somewhat. Perhaps we have heard the story repeatedly, and our hearing has grown dull. Perhaps Lazarus and Tabitha seem altogether too ordinary. But any of us who have tasted the power of illness and the bitterness of loss can never lose sight of this dazzling miracle. The gospel looks out over a world characterized by death, illness, and loss and yet declares that eternal life is the new order of the day, that Jesus himself embodies and assures us of the promise that death will not have the last word and that no boundary can ever cleave us apart from one another. Amen.