

ACTS 9:36-43

ST JOHN'S, 17.4.16, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

Jesus said to Peter, "Take care of my sheep." Those of you who were here last week will remember how the risen Jesus met some of the disciples on the beach by the sea of Galilee, the morning after a fishing-trip. They ate breakfast together, and then Jesus publicly restored Peter following his denials, and commissioned him to *take care of Jesus' sheep*.

We jump forward about four or five years to today's story from Acts. A lot has happened in the meantime; in particular, Jesus has been taken back into heaven, and his followers have been filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Today's story shows one way in which Peter, in the power of the Spirit, is able to fulfil his commission to *take care of Jesus' sheep*.

The early church had come through a period of great persecution, following the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. But in 9:31, we read: *and so it was that the church throughout Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria had a time of peace. Through the help of the Holy Spirit it was strengthened and grew in numbers as it lived in reverence for the Lord.* In the very next verse, we read that Peter *travelled everywhere*. He was taking advantage of the *time of peace* and fulfilling his commission to *take care of Jesus' sheep* by *visiting God's people*, to teach and encourage them. Just before today's passage, Peter is in Lydda, which is about 25 miles north-west of Jerusalem, on the route to the coast.

While he was there, Peter healed a man called Aeneas, who had been paralysed for eight years. Joppa was only about 12 miles away, on the Mediterranean coast, so it wasn't surprising that the believers there got to hear that Peter was in the area. They sent for Peter, and the rest, as they say, is history! The result of Peter bringing Tabitha back to life is recorded in verse 42: *The news about this spread all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.* As we think some more about this story, let's think about how these people came to faith. It happened in three stages: firstly they heard the word, then they saw the signs, and finally, they believed.

THEY HEARD THE WORD

This passage doesn't have much to say about hearing the word. But in 8:40, we read, *Philip found himself in Ashdod; he went on to Caesarea, and on the way he preached the Good News in every town.* Ashdod was further south on the coast, and Caesarea further north, so Philip must have passed through Joppa. It was probably at that time that Tabitha and her friends first heard the gospel and came to faith in Jesus. There will have been others who heard Philip preaching, but who didn't immediately come to faith. Still others may well have heard the good news in the meantime, from their newly-converted friends and family, but still remained to be convinced. So by the time Peter arrived in Joppa, there was a pool of people there who had heard the word, but who hadn't yet come to faith in the Lord Jesus.

THEY SAW THE SIGNS

When we read this passage, we might well ask, 'why?' Why was Tabitha brought back to life, when other good Christians weren't? In particular, Stephen, who in chapter 7 became the first Christian martyr.

Back in John's gospel, we read that John wrote about Jesus' miracles for a very specific reason: *in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life* (John 20:31). The primary purpose of Jesus' miracles, or signs, was to bring people to faith in Jesus. We can assume that the reason that the Lord continues to do miracles through his followers is the same: to bring people to faith in him. That's certainly what happened here: both those who saw the miracle, and those who heard about it as the news spread, came to faith in Jesus. We may not understand why the Lord raises some but not others. But when he does choose to act in this way, the result is that people come to faith.

The sign which these people witnessed was powerful and effective in bringing many people to faith in Jesus, for a number of reasons:

1. The raising of Tabitha was powerful and effective because it followed the example of Jesus. In particular, there are a number of similarities between the raising of Tabitha, and the raising of Jairus' daughter, which of course, Peter witnessed. In both cases, the house was full of people crying and mourning. Like Jesus, Peter *put them all out of the room* (v 40; cf Mark 5:40). The words spoken to the dead person were almost identical: Jesus said, *Talitha, koum* (Mark 5:41); Peter (assuming he spoke in Aramaic) said, *Tabitha,*

koum (v 40). Peter was following his Master's example in the way he dealt with this particular situation.

2. The raising of Tabitha was powerful and effective because it was performed by the power of Jesus. Peter didn't try to raise Tabitha by his own authority or power. Once the room was cleared of people, he *knelt down and prayed* (v 40). Having prayed, by the power of Jesus, he commanded Tabitha to get up.
3. The raising of Tabitha was powerful and effective because it was a sign of the salvation of Jesus. Peter dared to command the dead woman to get up because of his confidence in the power of Christ. Tabitha's resuscitation was a visible sign of new life, a visible sign of the power of the resurrection, and therefore also a visible sign of salvation.

THEY BELIEVED

The final reason that the raising of Tabitha was powerful and effective is that it redounded to the glory of Jesus. The credit, quite rightly, didn't go to Peter – it went to the Lord. It's clear in the gospel stories that Jesus raised Jairus' daughter purely by his own power and authority. It's clear here that Peter didn't raise Tabitha by his own power and authority, but rather by the power and authority of Jesus – so Peter doesn't receive the praise, but Jesus does.

Inevitably, *the news about this spread all over Joppa* (v 42). And so it wasn't only any non-believers who were at Tabitha's house that day who came to faith as a result of her resuscitation. It was big news

throughout the town, and the credit was going to Jesus. It's not surprising that as a result of this miracle, *many people believed in the Lord*.

CONCLUSION

The difficulty with all this is where it leaves us! Should we be attempting to follow Peter's example, and commanding dead people to get up? We need to bear in mind that Peter was personally commissioned by Jesus to take care of his sheep; he'd witnessed the miracles Jesus himself performed, he'd been present at Pentecost.

We also need to bear in mind that Peter wasn't just an ordinary believer: he was an apostle. In 2 Corinthians 12:12, Paul writes this: *the many miracles and wonders that prove that I am an apostle were performed among you . . .* In telling this story, and the story of the healing of Aeneas in vv 32-35, it seems as if Luke is showing how Peter, too, proved himself to be an apostle by performing miracles and wonders.

Its worth noting that, even back then, the ordinary believers didn't attempt to raise the dead. That's not to say that they didn't hope or even expect that Tabitha would be raised. Its interesting that Tabitha's friends laid out her body, but didn't bury it. But they didn't try to raise her themselves; they sent for Peter. Peter's reputation went before him; he'd healed the lame beggar at the Temple gate, and he and the other apostles had performed *many miracles and wonders . . . among the people* (5:12).

So, you and I are probably not called to raise the dead! (Although we mustn't forget that with God, all things are possible). What we are called to do is to live out the gospel, and so to bring new life to people. This is exactly what Tabitha was doing in her work of *doing good and helping the poor*, making *shirts and coats* for widows and others who were in need. And its what Peter was doing as he fulfilled his commission to take care of Jesus' sheep.

We're all called to live out the gospel, as both Tabitha and Peter did. We are all called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is what the Christian faith is all about. It's not about believing the right things (although what we believe is important); it's not about living by the right set of rules (although how we live our lives is important). The Christian faith is about living out the good news of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. As we seek to follow the examples of people like Tabitha and Peter, we too can bring new life to those around us.