

Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 12th May 2019, Easter 4

Readings: **Acts 9:36-43**
Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 23
John 10:22-30

I've baptised a lot of babies over the years and in all that time I have never been asked to name the baby Dorcas. There have been a few baby Tabitha's, but Dorcas seems to be a name that has gone out of fashion. Dorcas is the Greek translation of the Aramaic name 'Tabitha', which means gazelle. Think beautiful wild deer – and the name Dorcas is starts to sound pretty good!

When I lived in Bundaberg in the mid-nineteen nineties the Parish had a 'Dorcas Society', and this was a fantastic group of women who ran an Op-Shop for the Parish. Not only did they sort, wash, iron and sell second hand clothes... they created a safe space each day for people to come in and meet people who listened and cared. The Dorcas Society offered then an outreach to wider community of Bundaberg, which made a significant difference in the lives of many. These days, I am regularly inspired by the ministry of ten Op-Shops in the Western Region, who make a similar difference in the lives of many.

In today's first reading we heard about a woman called Dorcas, and in this we're told that she was a person who '*was devoted to good works and acts of charity*'. We're also told that she became ill and that she died from this illness.

Immediately this starts to resonate with us because we have all been blessed to know people who have been consistently generous in their care of others, and some of these have died. Those who loved Dorcas grieved her dying, and prepared her body for burial. They then sent for the Apostle Peter who was a leader in the church and, after he arrived, some of the widows who had been cared for by Dorcas showed him clothes that she'd made for them.

This sounds a very familiar space in Parish ministry. Much loved people die and the family send for a priest, or lay minister, who will pray and encourage them. Someone who will listen and support them as they grieve, and who will help them give thanks for the life of the person who has died. Sometimes the priest, or lay minister, is called to the bedside of the person as they are dying and there is the great privilege of praying with that person, and assuring them of God's love, as they move from this life to the next.

So, this all sounds familiar until we get to the part where Peter puts all the grieving people outside and prays, before calling Dorcas by her Aramaic name, Tabitha, and in God's grace she is restored to life. I've been with a lot of grieving families, and sat beside a lot of bodies

– but, I have never seen one restored to life. No matter how much people have longed for it, and prayed that it be possible – I have never seen one restored to life.

Consequently, the takeaway insight of this reading for me is not that we should pray hard beside the bodies of those who have died! It's fantastic that it happened for Dorcas and her community, and it would have been a great encouragement for the Christian community in Joppa. No, the takeaway insight for me is that the Joppa community knew that Dorcas loved God because of the way she lived her life. She walked the talk and 'devoted herself to good works and acts of charity'. I interpret this as saying she was generous with her time, her talents, and her money. So, remembering Dorcas all these years later we might helpfully ask ourselves if we are similarly generous and caring?

I hasten to add that the motivation behind generosity is really important! We could be generous to impress or shame others; or we could be generous to gain advantage or foster dependence. The motivation for Dorcas however seems to have been that she knew she was loved by God – and her generosity and love for others flowed from this. So, how does our experience of being loved by God, overflow into our actions and character?

Now, you might be thinking, well I'm just not a generous person these days! Or, I'm just not a caring person! Certainly when I look back at my life there have been times when I have been more generous and caring than I am now – but, that doesn't mean I should become complacent about this. I think generosity and care were two elements in the character of Jesus and as a follower of him, surely I want these to be elements of my own character.

When Paul identified the seven fruit of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians, I think he described nine significant elements in the character of Jesus. More than this, he went on to encourage all who follow him to develop these elements in their own character. And, why would we not want to more loving; more joyful; more peaceful; more patient; more-kind; more generous; more faithful; more gentle; and more disciplined?

Let's pray...

God of grace and love we give thanks for the work of your Spirit in the lives of all who follow you. This week we offer you our selfishness and indifference, and pray that you transform and renew our character. Create within our hearts and minds greater compassion and generosity. We pray in the name of the one who meets us where we are, Jesus the risen Christ. Amen.