Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 8th May 2022, Easter 4

Readings: **Acts 9:36-43** **Psalm 23**
Revelation 7:9-17 **John 10:22-30**

I have 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 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, thereby inferring beaty and grace.

When I lived in Bundaberg in the mid-nineteen nineties the Parish I worked in had a 'Dorcas Society', and this was a fantastic group of women who ran an Op-Shop. Not only did they sort, wash, iron and sell second-hand clothes… they created a safe space each day for people from the wider community to meet caring people from the Parish. At this time there are similar Op-Shop based ministries in the Parishes of Ipswich, Boonah-Harrisville, Texas-Inglewood, Goondiwindi, St George, Jandowae, Nanango, and Crows Nest… I am very thankful for the teams that makes each of these ministries possible, and for the way God uses them to bless.

In the first reading today (Acts 9:36-43) we heard about a woman called Dorcas, and 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.

This will resonate because most of us have been blessed by caring and generous people who have died, and there may still be grief about their loss. The writer of Acts tells us that those who loved Dorcas grieved and washed her body for burial. They then sent for the Apostle Peter and, after he'd arrived, some of those who Dorcas had cared for showed him clothes that she'd made for them.

This sounds like a familiar part of Parish ministry. Much loved people die and the family send for a priest, a deacon, or lay minister, who pray with them. They will listen and support as people grieve, help them give thanks for the life of the person who has died, and offer ongoing support until people find their feet again. Sometimes the priest, deacon, or lay minister, is called to the bedside of a person as they are dying and there is then the great privilege of sitting and praying with a person, as they move from this life to the next.

So, it all sounds familiar until we get to the part where Peter put all the grieving people outside the room, prayed, and then called Dorcas by her Aramaic name. It all sounds familiar until we hear that, in God's grace, Dorcas responded to Peter calling her name by opening her eyes and sitting up.

Now, I have been with a lot of grieving families, and sat beside the bodies of people who have died: in hospitals, nursing homes, and private residences; in morgues and in funeral homes… but, I have never seen a dead body restored to life. No matter how much people have longed for this and prayed that it be possible.

It's amazing that this happened for Dorcas and her community, and it would have been a great encouragement for the Christian church in Joppa two thousand years ago… but, what does it mean for us today? I do not think that it means we are to pray hard beside the bodies of those who have died hoping that they will somehow be restored to life!

I think an important insight from this text is that the Joppa community knew Dorcas loved God because of the way she lived her life. If you like, she walked the talk, for the reading tells us that Dorcas *'devoted herself to good works and acts of charity'*. I understand this to be saying she was consistently generous with her time, her talents, and her money.

So, remembering Dorcas all these years later we might helpfully ask ourselves if people in our family, friendship circles, and community can similarly see that we love God because of the way we live our lives?

I think it's important to acknowledge that the motivation behind generosity is important because sometimes we can be generous to impress or shame those who observe what we do; or we can be generous to gain advantage in the life of the recipient. The motivation for Dorcas appears to have been that she knew that she was loved by God – and that her generosity and love for others flowed from this.

How does the knowledge and experience of being loved by God, overflow into the way we live our lives, and the ways that we relate with other people?

Now, you might be thinking, 'Well, I'm just not a generous, or caring, person Cam, and that's just the way I am!' but… surely, we are all works in progress? We've all got things to work on? When Paul identified the nine fruit of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5:22), I think he described nine ways of being in the world that we can all work on and seek to develop and express in the way we live our lives.

Dorcas was particularly remembered for demonstrating two of the fruit described: her kindness and generosity… and, in God's grace, we can each seek to be more kind, and more generous, in our own character and living. But, the other fruit described seem to be interdependent so why would we not also want to be more loving; more joyful; more peaceful; more patient; more faithful; more gentle; and more disciplined?

As I think about these nine fruit I recognise that there are a couple which people could probably see in me, and there are a couple that need a lot of work! I'm going to make one of these a focus this week and put an activity into the rhythm of each day intended to foster and develop it. I do invite you to do the same – choose one and give it focus this week, and next week, and the week after that… until it is more clearly part of who we are.

Please would you join me in prayer:

> God of grace and love,
> we give thanks for the work of your Spirit in the life of the world,
> and in the lives of all who follow you.
> As we remember the life and faith of Dorcas
> we offer to you our selfishness and indifference
> asking that in your grace you help to develop within us
> greater compassion and generosity.
> We pray in the name of the one
> who calls us to follow,
> Jesus, the risen Christ. Amen.