

Online Reflection for Sunday 8th May 2022
Rev'd Margaret Cranston

The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke, the story of the early church, to follow on from his gospel writings.

In the first nine chapters of Acts, before today's reading, we have seen the disciples receive the Holy Spirit. Peter preaching the gospel and healing a lame man, Stephen martyred, the church persecuted, Philip and the Ethiopian and at the beginning of the chapter we read from today, Saul's conversion.

One of the glories of Luke's writings is that he can take us from these enormous, earth-shattering, history-changing moments to a small, intimate scene: an upstairs room filled with the knitting and sewing that had occupied the good lady who had just died.

Israel in Bible times was very much a man's world. The Bible mostly follows the stories of men and was written by men because they were the ones that had the privilege of education and were literate.

So when women are mentioned in the Bible it's good to stop and pay careful note as to why. Mary the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth her cousin, were important figures in the birth of Jesus and John the Baptist. The women who followed Jesus during his ministry listening to his teaching and caring for his need and rarely named. At the cross when others had deserted Jesus women were there and were the first at the tomb first to meet the risen Lord.

So let's go back to our first reading from Acts 9 a chapter that started with the miraculous conversion of Paul on the Damascus road. Now the story moves to Joppa a town on the Mediterranean coast near present day Tel Aviv airport.

At the beginning of Acts 8 we hear of persecution against the church in Jerusalem after Stephen was stoned to death and all the believers were scattered. Philip went up through Samaria and it was through his ministry that the church in Joppa started.

And here we meet Tabitha – otherwise known as Dorcas. Not only was she a woman, but she was named twice! She must have been a very significant person in the community. She was a disciple, possibly a leader of the church in Joppa, who was well regarded as a person who was always doing good, helping those in need and encouraging others to do the same. The fact that she was able to help the poor indicates that she herself probably wasn't poor. She made clothes, possibly spinning and weaving the cloth as well as stitching the clothes. She was skilled at her work. It was good quality and noteworthy. The women wanted to show it off!

She chose to help widows, one of the most vulnerable groups in society – not just with their physical needs but also spiritually. The fruits of the Spirit were clearly seen in Dorcas, especially love, kindness and goodness.

Dorcas became sick and died and 'all the people mourned her'. She was a well-liked popular figure, not just with the women but also with the men. So much so, that men were prepared to walk to Lydda to fetch Peter in the hope that he might be able to do something to save Dorcas. Peter did go back with them and raised her back to life.

Earlier on Peter had healed a lame man near the gate of the temple in Jerusalem and was met with opposition and much questioning. Now, Peter was travelling around the country responding to invitations and visiting groups of saints (v32). He was called by the saints to Joppa and once there he stayed for some time (v43)

And the miracle? Peter seemed to know instinctively what to do, sending them all out of the room and getting down on his knees to pray.

Peter had been with Jesus when he raised the widow of Nain's son from the dead (Luke 7:11), when he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11) and when he raised Jairus' daughter (Luke 8).

Peter knew that in the power of Jesus the dead could be raised, but it wasn't a very common miracle. Why was Dorcas chosen to be healed and raised to life? We don't know, but if she hadn't her story would probably never have been remembered. And her healing brought many people to believe in Jesus. The miracle showed God's glory. Dorcas still had work to do in her community.

I think that by this stage Peter had a really close relationship with God and he knew what God wanted. He knew that in this instance he Peter would be used as the vessel to perform a miracle in a similar way to Jesus, knowing the heart of his Father God.

In our Gospel reading we go back to a time before Jesus death and resurrection. People getting exasperated with Jesus because they thought he was always talking in riddles so they couldn't understand. In verse 24 we read "The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

Jesus says that for those who believe, it is all there and only those who don't believe can't see. He says that he did tell them plainly but they did not believe. The miracles he had done in God's name tell their own story. One of the main reasons for miracles is so that Jesus is glorified and people are drawn to him.

Jesus says that there is an easy test to know who are his 'sheep' (or followers or disciples). His sheep are the ones who listen to Him and follow Him.

After Jesus' death, resurrection, Ascension and sending the Holy Spirit the miracles that happened in the early church were still so that Jesus might be glorified and people come to know him, rather than on individual need. I feel that maybe people's questions about healing are because they focus on the individuals wanting miraculous healing instead of on God the healer.

When Jesus did miracles he attracted huge crowds of sick people wanting to be healed. We don't read about that with Peter. He did the occasional miracle but that seems to be all. Here we read that he stayed in Joppa for some time with Simon a tanner until Cornelius sent for him from Caesarea to interpret his dream.

What can we learn from all this? God cares for all people – the vocal and famous as well as quiet groups of widows – and all can serve Him.

After his ascension God sent His Spirit so that His followers could perform miracles - not for their own glory but God's glory and to bring people to Him. We need to listen to God's voice and learn to follow him, trust him and do things that bring glory to his name.