Sunday 8th May 2022

Acts 9: 36-43 and Revelation 7: 9-17 – What shall I wear?

How many here have nick-names? I am known by quite a few – Nicola, Nicki, Nic – and quite a few more if you include the different spellings used!

The first reading from Acts introduces us to Tabitha, also known as Dorcas. What is the purpose of telling us both Aramaic and Greek name for this deceased lady?

As we see in the progression of the passage, Peter speaks to her, probably in his home language of Aramaic, so says Tabitha, get up. This is very similar to the words that Jesus used when He is reported in Mark 5 of raising the daughter or Jairus to life. He said “Little girl, get up”. In Aramaic this would have been “Talitha, Koum” so Peter only changed one letter when he said “Tabitha, Koum”.

I also think that the fact that this lady was known by both her Aramaic and Greek name reflects that she was involved with both Jewish and Greek folk. She was a disciple of Jesus and therefore extended her help to everyone.

The widows that were gathered in the passage, wailing would perhaps have been of different ancestry and spoke different languages. The fact that Dorcas helped the widows, by making clothes for them, meant that she was involved with them.

Not just donating clothes for the sake of others seeing her do so, to prove that she was acting righteously – but getting to know the women, the outcasts of society, building a community who cared for her, just as she had cared for them, and most likely cared for each other. The gathering of these widows to mourn her reflects the love that was at the centre of her actions.

We are told the widows showed all the clothes that Dorcas had made for them to Peter. I have often overlooked this sentence, not really giving any thought as to whether it was adding something to what was happening in the passage.

Was it perhaps showing us the despair that these un-valued women were experiencing, with their prolific benefactor now gone, where would they get these items that they were being supplied with?

Or were they trying to persuade Peter that she was a good and righteous woman, worthy of being saved and healed – and in this case resurrected back to life?

This passage can show us how sometimes we can all make judgements on what people deserve, by what we know outwardly of people, what we can get from them, whether they come from the right background.

In the actions that Peter takes in the reports of Acts, and even the brief description of Tabitha means that they did not take this view in their life.

Peter went into the room, alone, and prayed. He knew that it was not his decision to make on what would happen to Dorcas. It was not dependent on her actions, ancestry or background. It was Jesus to determine what would happen.

Prayer was the key for Jesus, for the apostles and disciples, and therefore must be the key for us too.

In the passage we are told that “when Dorcas opened her eyes and saw Peter, she sat up”. The question that pops into my mind – what was the significance of it being Peter?

We are told earlier in the passage that the other disciples went to request Peter to attend – had they prayed for Dorcas? Perhaps when she was ill before her death.

Or had they prayed after she had died, seen her eyes open but because it was not Peter she had returned to death?

Was this experience planned by Jesus to strengthen Peter’s trust in Him, by showing Peter that all he had to do was continue to copy what Jesus had done when on earth in human form.

Perhaps Peter had been happy to show love to all he met, he had been happy to heal the sick in the name of Jesus, he had been happy to spend time with the outcasts and vulnerable of the community. But perhaps he had been hesitant about how far the power of Jesus could be seen through his simple prayers. It does not tell us in the passage – but as I say just another small detail that brings to mind a question for me.

Whatever the reason, Dorcas was raised back to life through the prayers that Peter offered to Jesus.

So keeping some of the details of this passage in mind, let us go to the passage from Revelation. As I said two weeks ago, this was written to encourage a few small churches in the first century, surrounded by oppression and questions regarding their faith. It was just as relevant to them as it is to us now.

The first part of the passage tells us that there was a multitude formed by every nation, tribe and language. It reflects the fact it is not just the Israelites that would be redeemed and raised to life after death.

In my mind, it also reflects the fact that Dorcas, or Tabitha, as well as the apostles and disciples were building communities in many different countries. Bringing Jesus to all.

We are told then that they were wearing robes of white. The robes were pure white because they had washed them in the blood of the Lamb – they had accepted the true meaning of the sacrifice that Jesus had made. That His death, as the Son of God, was so that their sins could be forgiven and only through acceptance of that could they become clean.

It tells us the attitude that we should have during life, and also the reality of being human.

They ALL had to wash their clothes – which means that we will all be touched and made grubby through sin while on earth – but if we choose to follow Christ, to attempt to copy the way that He lived, that despite our mistakes our robes will be washed clean. This can only happen through constant communication with Jesus through prayer. Yes, we can copy what He did in the bible, but very often we will be met with situations that are not seen as an exact replica in the scriptures. Just like Peter, there may be occasion where we have to change one or two letters!

We must not gather all our dirty washing together and wait until we have passed from this life before we put it in the wash. We must be doing our washing regularly, through prayer, through meeting with Jesus, asking for His forgiveness, offering our confession and turning away from temptations that will separate us from the presence of God.

If we think about the clothes that Dorcas had made, that the widows had been showing to Peter. Would all of them have been perfect? Every stitch exactly in place? How about any knitting – anyone here who knits – have you ever looked afterwards and found you had dropped a stitch, or perhaps the tension had dropped in one particular place?

I think it was possibly the same with what Dorcas made – there would have been imperfections. But because her motivation behind her action was Jesus and love, then her offering was made perfect through Christ, and received perfectly by the widows.

And what if one of the garments developed a tear or a hole – would it have just been thrown away? No, it would have been mended.

That is how we are in the sight of Christ. We are all imperfect – but if Jesus is allowed to live through us then our work will be made perfect.

Likewise, if we become grubby due to succumbing to sin and temptation, then if we choose to take our damaged selves to Christ, He will repair us.

It is our choice. In Revelation it does not say that Jesus took their clothes, it says that they had washed their clothes. A choice made from our free will. And what a promise we have if we choose to do our washing.

“they are before the throne of God
    and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
    will shelter them with his presence.
**16**‘Never again will they hunger;
    never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on them,’
    nor any scorching heat.
**17**For the Lamb at the center of the throne
    will be their shepherd;
‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’
    ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

That promise is for each of us, His kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven – if we continue to choose to follow Christ, as the Son of God, then we shall live under His perfect shepherding.