

DORCAS

Acts 9:32-45

1 Corinthians 15:12-28

“Death,” says the poem, “is nothing at all.” It’s a favourite poem to be read at funerals. Some people find it comforting: the idea that “I have only stepped into the next room.” Death is nothing at all, not worth bothering about. But we do bother about it. That poem was written by a man who knew that his death was approaching, who had had time to think about it, and to be reconciled to it. In my ministry here among you I have met several people who are not afraid of death, who are ready to go. Just this week I was talking with Bertha Morrison, and while she wasn’t complaining about life - far from it - she was reflecting that her 92nd birthday is approaching and that, logically, she must be in her last years. “I’ll be ready when my time comes, in fact I’m ready now,” she told me. In the next breath she affirmed that she still enjoyed life, she wasn’t weary of it, but she was ready to leave whenever God calls her.

Yes I’ve met with those who are ready to go. For them, death is, if not nothing at all, nothing to be feared. But for those who are left behind, death is never nothing at all. Death is a loss and a parting and causes great change and upheaval. Even though we have faith in God and faith for the future, there is still difficulty and grief involved.

And we fear death, we fear it for ourselves, maybe, but we fear it more for others because of the effect it might have on us: how will I cope if God takes my beloved?

When I worked in upstate New York I helped run a large youth group for teenagers. Running it with me was a young man named Joe Zulkowski. Joe was 25 years old. His twin brother also lived in the town and the rest of his family lived in towns nearby. All of them. Joe had reached the age of 25 without losing a parent, grandparent, a great aunt or uncle or a cousin. Lucky Joe, was my thought, who had by that age lost three grandparents and a father. But then I realised that it was only lucky Joe in one way. It was proposed that we take the kids on a mystery tour that would end up at the funeral directors, so that we could talk with them about death and our hope in Jesus. Joe was all for the idea at first, but on the night he admitted that he was really worried. He was so afraid of death; not his own death, but afraid of not knowing how he would cope when someone he loved died. He simply did not know. Would he be all right, or would he fall to pieces? Would his faith grow or would it wither? I lost touch with Joe after that year, but I often wonder how he coped when it came.

That’s what it is like for us - and how much more so for the Christians at Joppa when Dorcas died. The church was still in its infancy: it could well be that this was the first Christian they knew to have died of natural causes. What were they to? What had gone wrong? Didn’t Jesus say that no one who lived and believed in him would ever die? So what about Dorcas - or Tabitha?

They know that she really is dead - they have washed the body. But then someone has a bright idea: Peter is just up the coast at Lydda. News has come that he is making a tour around the scattered Christian communities, now that the threat of persecution has diminished for a while, and they have even heard that he has healed Aeneas. Everyone in Joppa knew Aeneas. The two communities were not far apart and there was a lot of coming and going. They knew how Aeneas had had an accident, and how he had been paralysed for 8 years. They knew how he had been well known, since

being bed-ridden didn't mean being hidden away in that climate and culture. And now he had been healed and everyone was talking about it and marvelling at it. Maybe Peter could help. Maybe Peter could at least comfort them. Maybe there was something more to what Jesus said about life and death than they knew, and Peter would be the one who could tell them.

So they sent for Peter, not saying what they hoped for, maybe not really knowing themselves why. But in their grief they needed help. They needed to tell someone how special Dorcas was to them; and so they met him, showing the concrete proof of her life of loving service: the garments she had made. And just like Jesus when he raised Jairus' daughter, Peter put them all aside and went in to the woman in private. He prayed - what, we're not told, and then he said to her "Tabitha, get up."

I wonder how he felt about it all. Was he afraid that nothing would happen? Had he put everyone out so that no one would know if he made a fool of himself? He might have been becoming used to the idea that God could use him to heal - used to it, though surely never taking it for granted. But this was something bigger.

And Tabitha - Dorcas - did get up, she did rise. And that's the last we hear of her. We're not told how she felt about being called back - any more than we're told how Lazarus felt, or the son of the widow of Nain, or Jairus' daughter. They were none of them raised for their own sakes, but for the sake of others, and Tabitha is no exception.

But I wonder how it felt to the widows who were there. Women who knew about death and grief. I wonder if there might have been a tendency to think like this:

Well, it's fine for her, she gets a second crack of the whip. She gets another go. But why her and not my husband, my Ben? I know she was a good Christian, but Ben hadn't the chance to hear, and he was a good man. I know we were going to miss her company and her support; but if my Ben was still here I wouldn't need Dorcas' support in the first place. Couldn't God have raised my Ben? Or could he not have sent someone to heal him, like Aeneas was healed? Why one and not another? It's not fair.

Why one and not another? That has been a difficult question for Christians ever since the days of the first church. Jesus went about healing, but still he didn't heal everyone who was ill in his land, just those who were brought to him. Peter was given gifts of healing, but he couldn't be everywhere at once, and in fact we only hear of him doing three healings - if you call Dorcas' raising a healing. He didn't see healing, but preaching the good news, as his primary task.

Have you ever prayed for someone to get better from a fatal illness and they have still died? And yet others who are prayed for survive.

When I was in Chicago at different times two of my friends had cancer. Dennis had a cancer which in the end spread up to an inoperable lump near his heart. He asked that I should pray, and I did, faithfully, and the lump disappeared, and the chemotherapy did its work faster than the doctors had ever expected possible, and he was healed and is still bounding though life.

Charles had cancer in his stomach, and the doctors thought that they could operate and get it out. And I and others prayed faithfully, but Charles died - only a few years older than me, with a life of ministry ahead of him. Why one and not the other?

Why Aeneas and not the other sick men of Lydda? Why Dorcas and not the

husbands of these widows? Why one and not another?

“Death is nothing at all” said the poet. But that is not what the Bible says. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:26) says St. Paul. “The last enemy.” From the story of the Garden of Eden right up until the book of revelation, the Bible is under no illusion that death is nothing at all. It is an enemy, it is the constant reminder that we are a fallen people living in a fallen world. It comes into the world at the first act of defiance against God, and right at the end, after the day of judgement, when death has done its work, the vision of John sees death thrown into a lake of fire to be destroyed (Rev. 20:14).

The questions raised by death are the big questions of life, and they are not those for which there is an easy formulaic answer. Luke makes it clear that Peter healed Aeneas and raised Dorcas and that the end result was that people turned to the Lord and believed in Jesus - which of course was excellent. But if he had healed or raised others, would that not have had a similar effect? It would seem likely that it would.

In matters of death and life, we are called to have faith. St. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth some years after these very early events in the life of the church, when many have died. He reminds them and he reminds us what is the basis of our hope: that Christ was raised, as a first-fruits, as a paradigm of God’s intention. He reminds us that there is a proper order for everything - just like the ordering of the harvest - the early crops and then the later ones. And so as we face death - for ourselves or for others, we can be confident.

We may never know why God ordains that one should die now and another live for years still to come - and of course matters of violent death raise other questions, for then it is not God but human will and action that has brought it about. We may never know, but we have to have faith that God knows what he is doing. He knows it for the person who dies and for those who are left behind.

Death is not nothing at all, it is the final enemy, it is the hardest thing to understand, but it need not be feared. As Christians we can approach death with curiosity and confidence. J.M. Barrie put it best in the words he put into Peter Pan’s mouth: “Dying will be an awfully big adventure.”