

Being a disciple

Sunday 8th May

John 10:22-30

Acts 9 32 - 43

As we begin to unpack what is going on in this story from Acts can I invite you to use your imaginations for a moment? Close your eyes if you wish. Make yourself comfortable, as the clock winds back to the first century AD.

We're in Joppa – a bustling seaport on the eastern shoreline of the Mediterranean. You can smell the sea in the air, hear the raucous calling of the gulls in the sky, feel the bustle of the seafarers, merchants and fishermen as they go about their daily business. This is a busy, thriving place. Much to and froing, coming and going, with the residents like the sea – changing with the tide.

A few hundred years before, tradition has it, Jonah found a ship here to try to run away from God. And today, there are others here who have run away. Not from God, but from the persecution which broke out in Jerusalem against the Followers of the Way, the followers of Jesus. Or at least it's reasonable to assume that is why this little band of disciples are here – they clearly know Peter, and he has been travelling around visiting the scattered communities of followers. By the time of our story, Saul has had his miraculous conversion, and the persecution has subsided. It is a time of peace for these scattered groups, and they are becoming established, and growing in numbers – more people are experiencing the love of God in Jesus lived out by his followers, and hearing and accepting Jesus' invitation to "follow me."

We don't know whether Tabitha was one of the original refugees, or whether she has become a follower since they arrived. As she has a Greek name, Dorcas, as well as an Aramaic one, it's possible that she is a local resident who has joined the community. Either way, she *is* clearly a *follower* – a disciple – a learner.

What else do we know about her? She is kind and generous. She is a gifted needlewoman who uses her gifts to benefit others. In many ways she is an ordinary woman who has been living an extraordinary life since she became a follower.

And she is dead.

Her community, her friends, are clearly devastated by this. You can kind of imagine one of them saying – "If Jesus has been here this would not have happened." And someone else remembering Martha saying something very similar to Jesus when her brother Lazarus had died – and then recalling the scene outside the tomb where Jesus had said "Lazarus come out!" And how he did. Alive!

And thinking “Well, Jesus isn’t here now, but I saw man today who told me that Peter is just up the road, and showing that Jesus is risen from the dead by doing amazing things in his Name.... What if?.....”

And so they send for Peter...

So, now imagine you are Peter. You’ve been busy working, and as you have prayed in the name and authority of Jesus you have seen the power and the presence of God working in people’s lives to bring healing. And the number of followers are growing. Surely this is what Jesus has called you to do.

But you get an invite from old friends. “Come and see us. Urgently”.

Stay?

Or go?

But somehow, you sense the voice of Jesus telling you that you need to be in Joppa.

So off you go, and you arrive, and your friends welcome you, and they take you upstairs, and –

not only is there a dead body on the bed, but your hosts are clearly expecting you to do something about it!

And depending on how deeply you have been immersed in the story this may be the moment when you feel your jaw dropping to the floor.

But Peter? Peter doesn’t miss a beat. He looks at the body of Tabitha, lying on the bed. He hears the noises and smells the smells of the waterfront, and is reminded of another day. A day when he was with Jesus and they were on the shores of a lake, and Jesus was called to the home of a little girl who had died. The daughter of Jairus.

It’s in Mark’s gospel

[Jesus] allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.

[Jesus] put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.

(Mark 5: 37-42)

And he does what he saw Jesus do.

He puts them all outside
He kneels and prays
He says "Tabitha, get up"
And she does.

He recognises the voice of Jesus telling him to go to Joppa,
and
He does what he saw Jesus do.

So, please come back from your imaginings and join us again....

I wonder what this story – and the gospel reading we heard earlier – might have to say to us today, about following Jesus, recognising his voice of Jesus, and doing what we see him do? And about what we should do about it.

In this morning's Gospel we heard Jesus telling the authorities, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

"I know my sheep – my people, the ones who belong to me, who follow me."

That's Peter. And Tabitha and the disciples in Joppa.

And it's us.

Each one of us.

God in Jesus knows you and he cares about you.

That lovely "The Lord's My shepherd" song which we sang a short while back – we can own it for ourselves. We're not on the outside of it looking in, thinking "what a beautiful picture." We are inside it.

Here's a suggestion - try singing it, or another version, or the 23rd Psalm itself and every time it says "I" or "me" insert your own name. When we are followers of Jesus, that is our relationship with God. Just as it was Peter's relationship. And Tabitha/Dorcas's relationship. Following.

And then, just as Jesus said "My sheep hear my voice", so they too "heard Jesus' voice".

Peter left a promising ministry in Lydda to go to Joppa. Tabitha had heard Jesus' call to use the gifts God had given her in the service of others.

Peter got to know Jesus' voice directly during 3+ years of being with him every day, and then recognised it after the resurrection. Tabitha/Dorcas maybe didn't know Jesus directly, but she learned to hear his voice through the teaching of the other disciples. Learned to recognise it for herself as she spent time with them, talked with them, asked questions of them, came to know Jesus better.

Hearing Jesus' voice.

And then, doing what they saw Jesus' doing. As part of becoming a disciple, Tabitha would have heard about Jesus' concern for the poor, the needy, the naked. The way he had provided - food for 5,000 hungry families for example. And in her own way, she was using her gifts for Jesus' work. Doing what she saw Jesus do.

And Peter. Peter who had so often seen amazing things happening as a demonstration that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. Who had heard Jesus say, as we heard in the gospel reading, "The works I do in my Father's name testify to me."

In other words - "The miracles show that I am who I say I am. My Father has given me the authority to do them. I'm doing them in his power, in his name."

.....in the same way as when my Dad was alive he gave me permission, authority, via a Power of Attorney to manage his money. It wasn't my money – it was still my Dad's. It wasn't Jesus' power, it was God's – delegated to Jesus, to show that Jesus is his Son.

And now to Peter, praying in the Name, the power, the delegated authority of Jesus to do exactly the same. Healing the sick. Raising the dead. To demonstrate that Jesus is who he says he is. The Son of God.

Now, let's not get too hung up about raising the dead. No – I haven't seen it happen directly through prayer, either. However, I do know that defibrillators can restore those who are clinically dead, and I believe they are God-given gifts to medicine.

And I do know that we have been praying about having a defib here, and that God is putting us in contact with people who will make that happen.

And that if and when that defib is used, we will give the glory to God.

Doing what we saw Jesus do.

Disciples. Followers

Hearing Jesus' voice

Doing what we saw Jesus do.

Well, we all say. It's all very well for Peter. He had three years with Jesus every day. I'm living in a different country, 2000 years later. It's not exactly a fair comparison is it?

Ok – so let's look at Tabitha then. It seems likely that she became a disciple by following other disciples. Other ordinary human beings just like herself who were trying day by day to listen out for and hear Jesus' voice, and to do what they had seen Jesus' doing. Doing it together. Learning – together. Getting it wrong – together. Saying sorry, trying again – together.

And sometimes. Gloriously. Seeing something marvellous.

Like a paralysed man walking.

Like a woman raised from the dead.

So, my question to us is- Is this what we are doing? As a community of followers of Jesus? Are we trying day by day to listen out for and hear Jesus' voice, and to do what we have seen Jesus' doing – and doing it in Jesus' authority, to bring glory to God?

For it is in the present tense – learning. It's not that we learn it all and then we do. It's that we are constantly learning by doing. It's an apprenticeship - not an academic qualification.

So - In the long chain of learning, from the Joppa disciples to Tabitha and then down the centuries, who are we following to learn how to listen to Jesus, to learn how to do what he would do, to learn how to use that to show others that Jesus is who he says he is – the Son of God, and Lord of all.

Who is encouraging us? Looking out for us? Praying for us? Sharing the story with us, reading the Bible with us, and teasing out what it might mean with us? Who is asking how we got on and picking us up when things go wrong and loving us anyway?

Who is doing this for us? And who are we doing it for? Who is learning from us?

As Paul did last week, I'm going to ask you to look around. This is our community of disciples. These are the people we are learning from and with, and who are learning from and with us.

We can do it as a big group, especially over coffee after the service. We can do it as smaller groups, and there will be opportunities for those who want to, to get involved with that over coming weeks. If you would like to talk it over some more, then come and have a chat. But if we are to grow as individuals and as a church community; in numbers, in our relationship with God, and in service to our local community, then we need to recognise that we should always be learning – together.

So – this morning we've talked about Tabitha and Peter.
About being Jesus' followers, his disciples, his sheep
About hearing Jesus' voice and responding
About doing what we saw Jesus doing

And about how all this is about learning together, from Jesus and from each other
Who are you learning from? Who is learning from you?

So, as we often do in Morning Worship, we're going to play some music now.
Maybe something has been said that really grabbed you – spend some time with it.
If not, perhaps spend some time thinking about who you are learning from?
And who is learning from you?