

Dorcas – A spectacular* life! – Acts 9: 36-42

I've always been drawn to this short, yet endearing episode amongst the many stories of Acts. Dorcas (and the account of her being raised to life) is rarely included in the many "Women of the Bible" character studies and usually given brief mention in commentaries. There is undoubtedly the bigger story of the church going on, but the personal story of Dorcas, or Tabitha, is still significant, as Luke makes clear through the brief yet important details of her life and character.

1. A spectacular miracle

- It was undoubtedly a dramatic event! These verses describe how Dorcas, who had died following an illness, was raised to life by the apostle Peter, through the power of Jesus Christ. The immediate spiritual impact in the sea-port of Joppa was significant, with many turning to the Lord as a result (v42). You can imagine how in that community Dorcas would have been regularly pointed out and spoken about for years to come as the "woman who came back from the dead"! However, we'll see that she was already widely-known in the community for other, good, reasons.
- It was a significant event in Peter's ministry. This miracle, together with the earlier healing of the paralysed man Aeneas in a nearby city, is included by Luke to mark Peter out as an authentic apostle of Christ and endorse his ministry, which he describes in the following chapters of Acts. We'll read next of Peter leaving Joppa and being called further up the coast to Caesarea. There he'll meet Cornelius, whose conversion leads to the opening up of the gospel to the Gentiles - a significantly new stage in the life and ministry of the early church.

Exciting times for the church! An exciting and unforgettable time for Dorcas, certainly! But Luke takes pains to highlight that Dorcas' life was already significant to the life of the church, of the local community of believers. A faithful disciple of Christ (v36), her life had already been "spectacular" in its' own, albeit very different, way...

2. A spectacular life

- Maybe this was not a spectacular life in the world's eyes, but a life that had made a difference to those around her. She was clearly loved and valued by the local community of believers, and her loss was keenly felt. So much so that they sent urgently and desperately for Peter to come at once, from the nearby town they heard he was staying. (They dared hope, perhaps, Peter might be able to restore their dearest friend to them...?) When he arrived many widows she had helped were weeping with distress and keen to show him the clothes Dorcas had made for them.

- Dorcas was well-known and valued for her character and good deeds to those in need (even Luke knew about it!) – she was “always doing good and helping the poor”, in particular making much-needed clothing for widows who depended on the kindness and charitable giving of believers.
- Her life was characterized by a genuine concern for others in that she was “always” doing good. This was not necessarily busily filling her days with every possible good deed. It describes a constant attitude of heart – a desire, an eagerness and devotion to do good to others (Titus 2:14, 3:14) where she could. She is a female version of Timothy in Philippians 2:20 who “takes a genuine interest” in the “welfare” of the believers! And she reflects that attitude of Jesus Christ we’ve recently been encouraged to have, in looking “not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others”(Phil 2:4).

The challenge for us...

Our gifts may be very different from those of Dorcas (some of us can barely thread a needle!) and very different from other believers we know too. But God has prepared good works in advance for each one of us (Ephesians 2:10). We are often too busy looking at, maybe even envying, everyone else’s good works that we fail to look out for the ones we are supposed to be doing, maybe the ones only we can do! God created each one of us – he knows our different gifts, different resources, different amounts of time, different existing responsibilities, different capacities, different situations etc etc. He gives us different opportunities for good deeds accordingly.

... How faithful am I with what God has given me to make the most of the opportunities to do good to others – to meet the needs I see around me?
 ... Am I characterized by a genuine concern for others? How eager and devoted am I to looking after my own interests rather than those of others?
 ... How does it encourage me to reflect on how Dorcas’ ordinary life played an extraordinary part in the life of the church?

Let’s pray for one another, particularly as we prepare for this next stage in the life of our church, of meeting together and re-starting ministries. We will need much sensitivity, care and thought for one another.

May we all find ways “our ransomed powers for us his sole glory use”! (James Seddon)

(*spectacle = object of public attention, spectacular= striking, amazing... OED)