

SERMON: Sunday – 8 May 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:36-43

John 10:22-30

How often have we overlooked Christ in our midst
because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time?
Or did not appear
from the direction we expected
or in the guise for which we were looking?
How often has Christ surprised us by being unrecognisable
and too close for comfort?
And while we argue about where the Messiah can be found,
Christ hangs out
with the lonely
and the hurting,
the outcast
and the stranger,
and gets on with the work of God.

The 'Festival of the Dedication' is better known today as Hannukah, a Jewish winter festival of lights. Its origins go back to the period of the Maccabean revolt, in the 2nd century BCE, against the Seleucid Empire which had taken over the temple in Jerusalem and in an attempt to Hellenise its Jewish subjects.

Hannukah marked the recapture and rededication of the Temple by Jewish freedom fighters led by Judas Maccabeus, as recorded in the apocryphal book, 1 Maccabees 4:36-59.

And as well as taking us from spring back to winter, the Lectionary catapults us from the post-Resurrection stories of the last few weeks back to the period just before Palm Sunday, when things were beginning to become dangerous for Jesus in Jerusalem and he was starting to speak about his coming death and resurrection.

By describing himself as the 'Shepherd', Jesus is implicitly identifying himself with God (cf. Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34) and he makes this explicit in v. 30, by saying 'The Father and I are one'. In making such a claim it's small wonder that the Jewish authorities want to stone him for blasphemy.

What worshippers sought then and seek now is reassurance that they are not alone in a hostile or indifferent universe; that they are known and cared for; that despite the uncertainties of life and the imminence of death, they are safe in loving hands. For those who are part of the flock there is nothing to fear. The shepherd knows his sheep and will take care of them, no matter what.

But long after the rising of Jesus, we discover at least one further resurrection account, the raising of Dorcas or Tabitha as recounted in Acts 9, and which marks a new shift in the post Easter story.

Here is a raising from the dead which is channelled the failed disciple, Peter. And all he says is "Tabitha, get up". He doesn't even preface it or end it with what might have been the expected ending, "in Jesus name". Take note those who believe things need to be done with a particularly religious set of words.

But then of course, in this new post resurrection world of the new kingdom breaking through the old, the Risen Christ is already present and working in and through the faith of those who have had the Spirit of Christ breathed on them.

Is this saying that raising the dead is possible in the presence of everyday disciples? Well, yes, it seems. Wherever there is faith in the Resurrected and Resurrecting Christ.

This is not to say that every death should be followed by such a command to rise up. When someone dies full of years we wouldn't expect them to be immediately raised up again. Would we? Somehow we accept death in such circumstances as an acceptance in the meantime, with the hope of a future resurrection. And I think that's ok. It doesn't assume a lack of faith. It's a different sort of faith.

We might say, may our loved ones rest in peace and (in time) rise in glory.

So why raise Dorcas? Well, she was likely to have been fairly young by today's standards, but perhaps more importantly,

At a time when the good news of Jesus resurrection was spreading quickly, the raising of Dorcas would have been a powerful affirmation of the resurrection; a very much needed sign to get people's attention.

That's not to say we don't need such signs now, or that they don't happen now, or that we don't pray for them, but perhaps we don't need them as much.

Before he died, Jesus told his disciples, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand” (27-28).

If we are like sheep, who hear the Good Shepherd’s voice, the voice which promises eternal life, then that’s what matters above all; that we take that word, believe it, leave in his hands, and get on with life as best we can.

We have eternal life, we will never perish and will never be snatched out of the Good Shepherd’s hand. What then is there to worry about?

Maybe it’s ok to be ‘anxious’ that as many people as possible discover this good news together with us.

Indeed, may it be so, in whatever way possible.

Risen Lord,
Move us to be about your business,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done.
Amen.