

Tabitha – get up! Sermon on Acts 9:36-43



Last week I finished my sermon with a question:

the question St Benedict encourages us to ask ourselves at the beginning and the end of every single day is: Am I daily becoming a more loving person? ...walking God's way overflowing with love in all I do? ...washing dishes, typing letters, developing systems, cooking meals, helping with homework, shopping for food, ironing shirts, mending things... Are we living our lives to the fullest, making them as a whole “the work of God”?

In the Book of Acts chapter 9 we may have found a person who is embodying exactly what St Benedict advises his household to do. Tabitha seems to be a role model for St Benedict's “Rules”: facing each day and its challenges with joy and trust in God; living our lives in praise of God and doing all we do to the glory of God; making our whole lives a prayerful journey that fills us with a deep sense of purpose in life, helps and supports others, and never lets God slip out of sight.

Tabitha seems to be exactly that.

She is introduced to us in Luke's second volume on the Jesus movement and the early church: the Book of Acts.

It is a unique book in the literature of the New Testament. It is neither gospel nor epistle, although it shows characteristics with both of those types of writing. Acts and the four Gospels are narratives... stories...

Acts and the New Testament epistles share a common subject: the life and struggles of the early church. It is a first document of Christian history, and it is full of the stories of early Christians and the way they built up communities, shared their faith, responded to the challenges of their day and supported each other in the name of a God who Jesus had introduced to them as a fatherly and loving God.

The story of the raising of Tabitha – which is Aramaic – and Dorcas – which is Greek for gazelle... follows the pattern the evangelist Luke likes to use: he pairs stories with male and female characters. In Acts 9:32-35 Peter heals Aeneas, a paralysed man who'd been sick for years.

Peter's raising of Tabitha immediately follows the Aeneas story. The story in which the man is the central character is briefer and less colourful than the Tabitha story.

Both stories however have a similar function in the Book of Acts: they portray Peter as a miracle worker in the line of the prophets and Jesus. And they win believers to the early church.

Tabitha is an important person in the Christian community at Joppa. Her death affects the disciples so much that they send two men to bring Peter to her bedside.

Tabitha is called a disciple. She is the only woman in the Book of Acts who is identified as such. She may well have been one of the church leaders in Joppa. Tabitha's value to the community, as it is expressed in our passage, comes from her good works and acts of charity. One example of the good she does is given in v39: Tabitha has made clothes for the widows of her town.

I can vividly see her in my mind's eye, as she sits and sews; her house full of beautiful fabric and the tools of a dressmaker; shelves filled with colourful material, threads, scissors, needles..., and people walking in and out, trying on a shirt or a tunic, being offered a meal and leaving with something new to wear. We don't know whether Tabitha was a widow herself. Or whether she's always lived as the head of a large household, as we know from Lydia who's story comes a few chapters later. Maybe Tabitha, as Lydia did, had employees and servants living with her. Maybe Tabitha did not only sew for the poor, but also made clothes to sell. Maybe sewing was the job she made her living with. And from what she earned by selling to the rich and established, she could produce for free and give to the poor.

Tabitha probably was the member of a church equally lead by men and women. There must have been children, too. And old people. And widows...

Widows in a patriarchal society were always depending on male support: brothers, sons, uncles... They had no economic resources of their own. Were they young widows, there was often a bunch of children to care for, too.

In Acts 6 we read that the early Christian communities had a practice of choosing church men to organize the caring for the poor. In Joppa this was obviously Tabitha's job. May she have been one of the stewards, or the treasurer, or the chair of the outreach & charity committee... anything like that...

She gave from her own means and played a significant role in the charity the community worked in the town of Joppa.

So it is no wonder that the widows are desperate after Tabitha's death. They weep. And later when Peter appears on the scene they show him all the beautiful clothes which Tabitha had made for them when she was still alive.

Peter, I assume, saw their sadness and the exhibition of Tabitha's good works, and couldn't help but help.

He had done it before. He had discovered that after Jesus' death he could perform the miracles which, while he was still alive, Jesus had done.

What Peter did, he did in the name of Jesus. The story tells us, how he seeks peace and quiet, kneels down and prays... obviously not yet focussing on Tabitha, but on the source of his faith and his power to help and heal. So filled with divine

energy he turns to Tabitha's body, and speaks to her. "Tabitha, get up," he simply says.

I like that.

He doesn't use millions of words, spilling them all over the situation, but sticks to the powerful and simple!

Other than the lame at the temple gate some chapters earlier in Acts, Tabitha doesn't immediately jump up and praise God. No. It is a slow flow of things: Peter speaks. Tabitha opens her eyes. She sees Peter. And she sits up. Peter gives her his hand and helps her up... slow motion... fully concentrating on the need of the moment.

Only when all this is done, Peter calls in the others, and shows them that Tabitha has come back to life. This news of course spread rapidly... and many new people began believing in God.

The passage ends with a sentence that I found a bit odd, when I came across it for the first time. I felt as if it didn't really belong there – or wasn't really needed. "Meanwhile Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner."

When I looked at it more closely, I discovered its meaning and significance:

Simon, the tanner, was by no means a member of the upper class of the society of Joppa. Peter stayed and made a home with a man from the working class who practiced a job that was regarded as one of the lowest of all. Peter, who'd just discovered his extraordinary ability to heal the sick and raise the dead, does not think a tanner unworthy to be visited. By choosing Simon's home, he clearly sets a sign that in the early church the principle of equality was seen as one of the essentials of their young and new faith.

So far, so good...

When we meditated on Tabitha's story in the home group ten days ago, I had a new idea. I suddenly asked myself, what it would sound and feel like if I read the Tabitha story as if it was my story.

I tried it out at home. And I was deeply touched.

I would like to do this with you now. I would like to invite you to see this as a kind of experiment. Please listen to the story from Acts 9 as I read it as if it was my story.

And maybe take the idea home with you: read the text and identify with Tabitha – or with Peter – or any of the other people in the story. Try to see what it feels like to walk a mile "in their shoes"..., and discover then how much more the text actually has to do with you, your very own life and your life story.

Let us experiment now. I read from Acts 9:

Now there I was, living in Joppa. My name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. It means gazelle.

I was devoted to good works and acts of charity.

At that time I became ill and died.

When they had washed me, they laid me in a room upstairs.

Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay."

So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that I had made while I was with them.

Peter put all of them outside, and then knelt down and prayed.

*He turned to my body and said, “Tabitha, get up.”
 Then I opened my eyes, and seeing Peter, I sat up.
 He gave me his hand and helped me get up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed me to be alive.
 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.*

I can't say that now I see Tabitha with totally new eyes. But I must admit that through this little experiment she had become more of a real person to me. I could picture her vividly.

I saw this woman: faithful and self-confident, living in a very young faith community, searching for something new, for more than her old belief could provide, a head of the household, a church leader, a business woman... A woman who moves fast (if they called her gazelle), a strong and busy woman, outgoing and welcoming, seeing the world with open eyes and a clear mind, knowing what is right and wrong. Not allowing her skilled hands to rest before the day's work is done and the last need is stilled. Loved and loving. Freely giving and always full of ideas of how to respond to different people's needs... Able to stand up and speak out loud... Not afraid of showing solidarity with the underprivileged. Always happy to grant support to those who were overlooked by everybody else... Never too tired to carry on doing good things. Never lazy, only seldom frustrated, and blessed with the godly gift of turning every anger into energy that could then bring about change. Tabitha – always and everywhere making a difference.

And all of a sudden she is ill and dies.

Nothing is as it was before.

Tabitha's good works are past.

Her body unable to move, care, breathe, live.

Now it is the others who must care for her. Attend to her need. Pay her a last service.

They take her, touch her, wash her, dress her – probably in one of the many lovely dresses that she had made -; they lay her in a room upstairs where it is peaceful and quiet. And as it is the custom, they weep and mourn and shed their tears.

But some of them, who've loved her so much, and who she may have loved equally, can't accept this death. They don't agree to it. Don't believe it. Won't have it... Must still do something...

Some of them refuse to let Tabitha go. They seek a way out.

Hoping against all hopelessness they send for help. They are convinced that Peter can help and urge him to come.

As in the past it had been Tabitha doing good, helping out, seeking a way, so now it was them. She had done so much for them. Now they responded to such love and care by insisting almost stubbornly that there must be a way back to life for her!

I can imagine their relief when finally Peter arrived: the man who'd shown such extraordinary power.

And then it is Peter who attends to Tabitha, who gives, cares, invests... He goes upstairs, understands immediately who she must have been, and what she must

have meant to them all. He sees their love for her and the despair her loss is bringing about. He is fascinated by her work which they show him, he gets an idea of her role within the community, and how much they all need her that he is willing to help. Not in his own name, but in the name of God who'd made Tabitha who she was: a resourceful and loving worker in God's wonderful workshop. Her death was too early. She should live. And call her back to life... - is what Peter did.

Tabitha heard his words, opened her eyes, saw him, sat up and took the hand he offered and allowed him to help her stand...

She who had helped and sustained so many, had now been helped and raised up so miraculously. Being the one helped and held, was a new perspective in Tabitha's life that did not weaken her at all, but showed her a wideness and a mercy and a grace and a depth that she'd never before experienced. Community life at its best: giving and taking, moving and resting, acting and accepting. Through the miracle Peter worked, Tabitha was given a new chance to life – in all its fullness. With all that belongs to it: the joy and the pain. The strength and the weakness... The working and the waiting...

So when I tried to put Tabitha into picture for the front of the bulletin, I decided to paint her sitting down... squatting comfortably on the floor, her long hair open, a warm blanket around her shoulders. With one hand she holds herself as if to reassure herself that she can feel her own body again.

The blanket in which she is wrapped is a symbol for the community I see surrounding her: now not just taking from her, but also caring for her.

On the blanket you can read a bit of her story. And also the names of the two disciples who had just discovered Peter's healing power.

Besides other patterns I wrote down the names of women: women, sisters, friends to support the one who had just escaped the dead and dark side of life.

I cut out a moon and glued it on to connect her with nature and the rhythm and the flow of life.

The background Tabitha sits on is a mixture of a garden-like flowery graphic and some old Greek letters – actually taken from the part of acts that tells us Tabitha's story. I want to show a Tabitha working and being cared for in God's garden on the one hand, and rooted in tradition and surrounded by God's promises on the other hand. Last but not least: I didn't give Tabitha a face, because she could be each and everyone of us at very many different times throughout our lives: devoted to good works, loved by others, ill and dead, cared for and lifted up again by three simple but magic words: Tabitha, get up.

May we all hear God whispering in our ear: My son, my daughter, get up.

And may we then open our eyes and see the world around us. May we hold others by the hand and continue the long and exciting journey of life on which we are invited to ask ourselves: Am I daily becoming a more loving person? ...walking God's way overflowing with love in all I do? ...washing dishes, typing letters, developing systems, cooking meals, helping with homework, shopping for food, ironing shirts, mending things... giving and taking, moving and resting, acting and accepting. Are we living our lives to the fullest, making them **as a whole** "the work of God"?