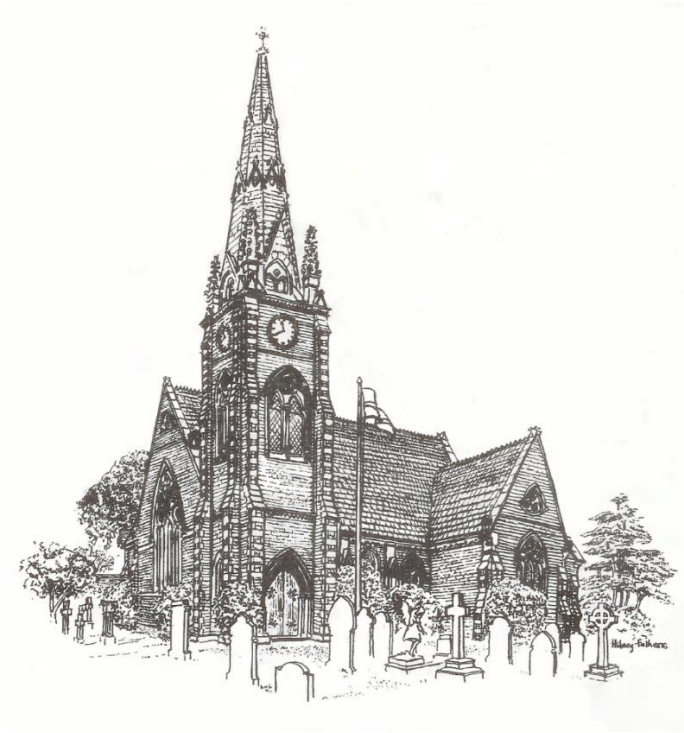


# All Saints' Thornton Hough



**Lent 2021: On the Bible's back roads  
Where old stories and our stories meet.**

**Week 6**

## Wednesday March 24<sup>th</sup>: Tabitha: [Acts 9:36-43](#): ‘Tabitha, get up’

Most human beings who have populated planet Earth over the millennia have left no historical record of their presence; they have lived and died in complete obscurity. But for her encounter with Peter, Tabitha would have been one of them. She was just an ordinary person living in an ordinary house in an ordinary town and yet her example of Christian service is one that all of us should take to heart.



*Reconstruction of weaving workshop, Nazareth Village*

The first thing that is said about her is that she is a disciple. The Greek word *mathetria*, meaning disciple, is given its feminine form reminding us straight away that the meaning of the word isn't restricted to twelve men. In the biblical sense of the word a disciple is a follower of Jesus, one who learns from his teachings and tries to live them out. Tabitha seems to have taken her discipleship very seriously, was undoubtedly greatly loved by all who knew her and was extremely generous with her time and resources.

That would explain why her fellow disciples ran to fetch Peter, who happily just happened to be in the vicinity. At this point in the story Peter is on the cusp of a very important discovery. After his ministry to Tabitha, a game changing rooftop vision (Acts 10 v 9-16) finally gets it into his thick head (I'm not having a go at him, I have one of those too) that the good news is not just for Jews but for everyone (Acts 10 v 34-35). So even though he is an apostle and is the agent through whom an amazing miracle takes place he has not stopped being one of Tabitha's fellow disciples. It is a reminder to us that the lifelong learning curve intrinsic to the discipleship journey does sometimes include unlearning things we thought we knew.

Tabitha's discipleship journey has had a specific focus on caring for the poor (v 36) for whom she has been tireless in making and supplying clothes (v 36). The fact that Peter, upon entering Tabitha's room, is surrounded by a group of widows eagerly thrusting items of clothing she had made for them in his face reflects both the vulnerability of such women at that time and the depth of their

gratefulness to her. She seems to have gone about her ministry of care without a great deal of fuss; one imagines that she simply got on with it using the God given talents she possessed.

When, through Peter's Spirit inspired ministry Tabitha was raised from death, it enabled her (we presume) to continue her ministry but also acted as a catalyst for the spread of the good news in the area (v 42); there's nothing like a miracle to get people talking. However having been brought out of obscurity momentarily as a result of an apostle's visit, Tabitha immediately falls out of the limelight and continues her work under the radar.

I know many people like Tabitha who quietly go about the business of caring for others. They don't want a reward or their names up in lights; they just want to get on with it. I have a link, alluded to earlier, with a local Christian charity project which procures and fills cardboard shoeboxes with items, such as combs, toothbrushes and toothpaste, toys, pencils and pencil sharpeners. These are the kind of things that are taken for granted by many (but by no means all) children in this country but not by children in Eastern Europe and Africa where they are distributed to those in greatest need. Among those who support the project are those who make soft toys, scour the shops again and again for suitable items, wrap and fill boxes and donate generously. There is another project in my area run by local churches providing a refuge for those living on the streets where they can get a meal, a shower, medical advice, a listening ear and time in a warm place. Many reading these words will know of other similar projects where Tabitha's way of serving is making good things happen.

Of course Tabitha on her own could not meet all the needs of those in her community. However, when faced with the choice between doing something rather than nothing she had a look at her skillset and decided that making clothes for those in need was something she just had to do. But of course she wasn't working on her own. In the course of preparing to visit Timișoara, Romania as part of the charity project mentioned in an earlier reflection I attended a conference in London and met and listened to people involved in other projects to help a country that had only recently been freed from pretty brutal Communist rule. It helped our team to see that, rather than playing a lone hand, we were a small part of a much bigger effort.

I wonder what happened in Tabitha's life after Peter's visit. She may well have become something of a local celebrity. But I'm sure it didn't go to her head; she wasn't that kind of person. Her story challenges us as to whether there is anything more that we could be doing for the needs we see around us. None of us have access to the kind of resources that will transform the entire world but doing nothing is not an option that Jesus leaves open to us. And I get the impression that Tabitha absolutely loved her work which is surely part of the reason why so many people treasured her. Whether we are involved in a shoebox project, helping with a food bank, supporting a local hospice, raising money for charity projects or any one of other myriad ways in which we can work together to make the world more like the Maker intended, we are meant to give and serve joyfully. These tasks are not meant to be onerous (although that does not mean that they aren't hard work!); they are instead deeply fulfilling.

They also have a key role in our discipleship. I'm sure that Tabitha learned a great deal about herself and her walk with God as a result of her project to help clothe the poor of Joppa. The project in Timișoara was a very steep learning curve for all of us involved. We learned a lot about ourselves, about human nature more generally and, very importantly, about God. It's why being involved in whatever way we can in God's work in the world is such a key part of what it means to be a disciple. It can be tempting to look at the kind of stark inequalities, bitter divisions and increasing antipathy to the Christian faith that increasingly characterise the contemporary world and just throw our arms in the air as if resigned to the fact that nothing we could do will make a blind bit of difference. When we are tempted to feel like that we could do worse than imagine Tabitha in her house spending many hours making a single piece of clothing for one vulnerable widow. For her that one single person really mattered and was worth all the time and effort. It was probably only when she was presented by Peter to the 'believers and widows' (v 41) that she fully understood just how very much her work had been appreciated. But that's not the point, Christian service is not a beauty contest in which we try to impress God or other people, it is what we do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Questions:** Are we ever tempted to give up in the face of the needs of the world? What more could we be doing?

**Prayer:** Lord, help us to be active in our discipleship and to be co-workers with you in building your kingdom on earth. Amen.

**Friday March 26<sup>th</sup>: Lydia: [Acts 16:11-15,40](#) :  
'The Lord opened her heart...'**

I love Charles Dickens' wonderful seasonal novella A Christmas Carol and read it every December in the run up to Christmas. The story of the conversion of Scrooge from mean spirited and hard-hearted businessman to generous philanthropist is perhaps the most influential story he ever penned; its publication certainly led to a significant increase in charitable giving. At one point in the story Scrooge is alongside the Ghost of Christmas Past listening to his nephew's wife play a 'simple little air' on the harp and we are told, 'When this strain of music sounded, all the things the Ghost had shown him, came upon his mind; he softened more and more; and thought that if he could have listened to it often, years ago, he might have cultivated the kindnesses of life for his own happiness with his own hands...'. Now we don't need to compare Lydia with Ebenezer Scrooge (apart from the fact that they were both wealthy business owners) but just as the beautiful harp playing opens a door in Scrooge's fictitious heart and leads to a complete change of mind so Paul's words, through the grace of God, open Lydia's heart to the good news of Jesus (v 14).



Her spiritual journey had been going on for some time. She is described as a 'worshipper of God' (v 14) which means that although she was a Gentile she was sympathetic to the values and beliefs of the Jewish faith without having actually converted to Judaism. What this meant was that, as far as she was concerned, Paul wasn't starting from scratch. When

people become Christians, the interplay between the work of the Holy Spirit and the part played by the new convert is difficult to pin down. Paul makes it clear that Christians shouldn't slap themselves on the back for having earned a place among the elect because they made the right response; even the ability to respond to grace is itself a gift of God (Eph 2 v 8). Yet, at the same time, we do need to say 'yes' to God. We don't only do that when we become Christians, of course, as we saw yesterday when considering Ananias - the Christian life involves aligning ourselves with the will of God as a way of life.

What we glean from this riverside encounter is that we would not be able to respond to God's message and his love if he weren't at work in our hearts. In 'A Christmas Carol' it is the three ghosts who place images of the past, present and future before Scrooge which work on him bit by bit until he becomes a changed man. In Lydia's case the Holy Spirit, which had already been at work in her heart over a number of years, enables her to see in very sharp focus what had been previously been seen from a distance.

It is an encouragement to us that when we share our faith with other people the Holy Spirit will use our words, our lifestyle and our prayers to speak to people's hearts; from beginning to end, conversion is a gift of God's grace rather than a human endeavour. I think most of us know this but it worth being reminded from time to time when, for example, we are the only Christian in our workplace, our circle of friends, our class, our WhatsApp or Facebook group or our family, that we are not on our own but that God is with us and, often under the radar, working gracefully through us by the Spirit.

Of course, not everyone will respond positively to the good news. We're told that Lydia, attentively listening, responded to Paul's proclamation of Christ, but we know that there were other women there (v 13) who, it seems, didn't have the same openness. When Paul visited Athens, in spite of him having done his homework and quoting from Greek philosophers to back up his message (Acts 17 v 27-28), the response was not as overwhelming as he might have hoped (although his labours were not entirely fruitless - Acts 17 v 33). Yet such was his faith in the work of the Holy Spirit to change lives that he had to be persuaded to stay with Lydia rather than move on to the next set of encounters that make up the life of an itinerant evangelist (v 15). There's nothing at all wrong with inviting people to an event or course at church to unpack the basics of the Christian faith but it's worth also remembering that such was Jesus' confidence that God had irreversibly changed the lives of those he healed or set free from evil, as often as not, he sent them straight home to share with their loved ones what God had done for them!

On that note, it's interesting that without delay (or going on a preparation course) Lydia is baptised along with her household; the Holy Spirit has touched this family which will never be the same again. When Lydia invites Paul and his colleagues to stay with her, she includes the phrase, 'if you consider me to be a believer in the Lord' (v 15). I wonder if this reflects both humility and

excitement at her new found faith. It's clear that by the end of Paul's rather eventful visit to Philippi, Lydia's house was where the local Christian community was meeting (v 40). Even as Paul and Silas were being attacked, stripped, beaten and thrown in prison, the Holy Spirit was growing the church.

Of course, it isn't just in the area of evangelism that the Holy Spirit is at work in us and through us. As a priest working in a parish context, I ministered to people with specific needs on many occasions, including taking weddings and funerals and doing lots of listening to people in pain many of whom who did not subsequently become part of a Christian community. Even though many of those people did not join the church I still believe that God was at work in their lives. Just because the person we have been caring for and praying for doesn't start coming along on a Sunday doesn't mean that we have failed God or not demonstrated enough faith. God is at work in all sorts of ways well beyond the church door and I have encountered sincere faith and praying hearts in many who do not attend church on a regular basis. Of course it is very important indeed for Christians to meet for worship as they did at Lydia's house and as the writer to the Hebrews encourages his readers to do (Heb 10 v 25). But we mustn't place limits on how God works and who he is working in and through.

One very good definition of mission says that it is about finding out what God is doing and joining in. The less assumptions we make about how and where the kingdom is being built the more our eyes will be open to the work of the Spirit who cannot be made to march to our tune. The church is, of course, an integral part of God's activity in the world yet whenever the hungry are fed, people are released from poverty, conflict ceases, medical advances are made, local communities come together to help those in need and people receive a fair price for what they produce God is just as much at work as he was in the heart of Lydia by the river in Philippi.

**Questions:** In what way did the Holy Spirit open your heart to the good news of Jesus? What does 'finding out what God is doing and joining in' mean for you?

**Prayer:** Lord, give us a clearer vision of your Spirit's work in the church and the world and by your grace give us the will to be part of it. Amen.



**Saturday March 27<sup>th</sup>: Bartimaeus: [Mark 10:46-52](#):**

**‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.’**

I wonder what goes through your mind when you encounter the homeless on the streets of our cities. They are there in increasing numbers and even though for many, I suspect, they are invisible they are all people with a story to tell. I often wonder when seeing someone sleeping rough what series of events led to the present reality of life on the streets.

It was Bartimaeus’s blindness that meant that he sat there day after day by the roadside with his cloak spread out for donations. Unable to support himself and with nobody in the world to look after him begging was his only option. Day after day of humiliation and mockery, of hearing everybody else going about their business and chatting with family and friends while being locked in a sightless world from which there was no escape. This was all that life was ever going to be – blindness in those days was a one-way ticket to isolation. To most people in Jericho on that particular day Bartimaeus might as well have been invisible. Save one.

Jesus was passing through on his way to Jerusalem. He is on the final journey of his earthly life and is about to set off uphill all the way to Jerusalem where he knows that he will suffer and die. He is in a large group of people all on their way to celebrate the Passover festival commemorating the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Yet in their excitement they walk straight past the man by the roadside enslaved by blindness.

Bartimaeus had got wind of the fact that Jesus was somebody very special, perhaps even that he was able to cure blindness. So when he hears that Jesus is coming past he knows that he has just one shot; it’s now or never, slavery or freedom. He screams, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me’ (v 47). He screams and screams and screams even as he is told to shut up and get lost (in all sorts of cruel ways). Jesus stops and in just two words changes the whole of the atmosphere around him. He could have that effect, a bit like when a stone is dropped into a pond and the ripples circle out. In asking those nearby to ‘call



him' (v 49) he has communicated to everyone that this beggar is a person and suddenly the abuse is replaced by encouraging words (v 49b).

Importantly Jesus does not just go ahead and decide what was best for Bartimaeus; he first asks him what he wants him to do for him (v 51). In doing this Jesus treats him with humanity and respect. He wants to see (v 51b); obvious enough, but when we read the Gospels it is clear that there is more than one way of seeing. There are a number of healings from blindness recorded in the Gospels and these were remembered and thought significant because of the obvious spiritual symbolism embodied in them. This is made most clear in John's Gospel where the healing of a man blind from birth leads to a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees about spiritual blindness (John 9 v 35-41). When Jesus heals Bartimaeus, we read that he 'followed Jesus along the road' (v 52). On several occasions in the book of Acts Christianity is described as 'the Way' (Acts 9 v2) and the word for 'way' is the same used here for 'road'. We're meant to know that not only was Bartimaeus's physical blindness cured but the eyes of his soul were also opened as he followed Jesus down the road as a new disciple.

If we imagine Jesus coming to us and asking us 'What do you want me to do for you?' what would it be that we want to see? Perhaps we would like to see more clearly the guidance of God, to see and address a habit or attitude that is harming our faith or our relationships with others, to see the truth that is in the Bible in a deeper way or to see more of the love of Jesus. Perhaps there is something else that you would like Jesus to do for you or for someone you love. I can't promise the instant sight giving healing that launched Bartimaeus on his life of discipleship but I do know that your prayer will be heard by one who loves you and respects you very much – our Lord Jesus Christ. We can sometimes feel that, rather like Bartimaeus, we don't matter very much either to God or to other people. We think that God has much more important things to worry about than what is on our hearts as we pray. He doesn't. When Jesus died on the cross it was for every single human being who has ever lived or will ever live in the future; and that includes us. We are all loved and cared for a very great deal more than we too often think.

In considering how desperate Bartimaeus was for Jesus to stop and hear his request I often lament the times when prayer has been put to one side because of something that seemed more urgent or important at the time. That sense

that prayer has to be fitted around everything else that makes up day to day life is itself a form of spiritual blindness. I'm aware of how busy people's schedules are and I vividly remember how difficult it was to find quiet moments when there were small children in the house. But if we are to stay close to Jesus we will need to match the urgency that Bartimaeus amply demonstrated in his encounter with him.

Everything in his life changed from that moment. From being totally helpless all kinds of possibilities opened up literally before his eyes. Jesus had recognised his faith and given him the gift of sight in more ways than one. I wish we knew more about what happened in Bartimaeus's life after he followed Jesus down the road. How many others came to believe in Jesus through his testimony? How many people were blessed because they knew him? These are important questions (if unanswerable!) because at the end of the day it wasn't just about him; he didn't receive faith and healing to keep it to himself. Those who follow Jesus on the Way are not members of a private club but a source of blessing for those around them. Those who follow Jesus Christ have something precious to share; the life of God's kingdom. They don't do this by bashing people over the head with a Bible or telling them off when they get it wrong; they do it instead by being the kind of people God wants them to be. I suspect that most Christians have no idea of the way in which they have blessed the lives of those around them or even of those they might have met only briefly. God is at work in all kinds of ways that we don't easily see – another form of blindness! So do be encouraged as you, with Bartimaeus, follow Jesus along the road.

**Questions:** What is it you would like Jesus to do for you or a loved one today? How can you in the context of your daily life make sure time with God doesn't get squeezed out?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you that everyone matters to you. Help us to live that truth out in our daily lives. Amen.