

Wednesday March 24th: 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.