

DEATH IS NEVER THE LAST WORD

25 April 2010 (Anzac Day) - Easter 4

Readings:

Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17

On most mornings I go for a five and a half kilometre walk. I follow the same circuit so each morning I pass the RSL building in Wellington St. On a board outside that building there are the words of the Kohima “when you go home tell them of us, and say for their tomorrow we gave our today”. This epitaph is included in lots of memorials around the world, most notably at the Indian town of Kohima where there was a significant battle during World War Two – although the words of the epitaph come from an earlier era. I find these famous words quite moving: When you go home tell them of us, and say for their tomorrow we gave our today. One of the reasons why I find it moving is that it suggests that out of death there can be newness and gain. Death is never the last word.

And that’s my theme this morning: death is never the last word. The great word of the Christian faith is resurrection. Nevertheless, death happens, and each of us will die. Death comes to some at a young age, and as will be recalled in countless Anzac Day commemorations around the country today, death can come in quite horrendous circumstances.

But death can be a gift. It can be a gift when it comes at the end of a long period of struggle and suffering. And it can be a gift to others in the spirit of the Kohima – for your tomorrow we gave our today. Today we honour the death of those Australians who gave us our today. Those tragic deaths opened up new possibilities for those who followed, and it is right that we do not forget.

In today’s reading from the book of Acts we find the story of a death, not a death occurring as a result of war injuries. Rather it would seem like natural causes. But the interest is not in the death per se, but in what ensued after death. In this instance death was not the last word. There was also a resurrection.

The apostle Peter was called to the home of Tabitha, a Christian woman who had died. Peter went to the room where Tabitha lay, surrounded by tearful mourners. He asked everyone else to leave the room while he prayed and then looking at the body, said “Tabitha, get up”. The Scripture then tells us that sure enough, Tabitha opened her eyes, and Peter helped her to her feet.

Now this is one of several Biblical stories which tell of people being raised from the dead. This particular story has many of the same words as the Biblical account of the occasion when Jesus restored the daughter of Jairus. Many will be familiar with the story of Jesus raising Lazarus who was said to have been dead four days and was well and truly buried. There’s also the story of Jesus raising the son of the widow who lived in the town of Nain. But the story in Acts is not of Jesus raising someone. This time it is one of the disciples, Peter, doing the kind of thing Jesus himself did. Back in the Old Testament Elijah and Elisha are said to have raised people from death. And of course at the heart of the Biblical message

is the story of Jesus crucified but risen. There is plenty of Biblical support for the thought that death is not the last word.

But what are we to make of these Biblical stories? Do they make sense in the 21st century? Some of us have no difficulty in accepting these stories as historic facts. Others of us do. From this point in time it is impossible to know exactly what happened in the case of Tabitha for example. It may have happened just as it is recorded. Or maybe it was akin to the near-death experiences we talk about today. Was Tabitha not dead, but in a deep coma with a barely recognisable heartbeat? Was she seriously ill and as the exciting story of her restoration spread the story was embellished a little by the time it was written down a couple of decades later? We just don't know. What we do know is that remarkable things did happen in that first century AD, and that the story – legend or fact – became an important part of the story of the early church, perhaps because Tabitha, also known by her Greek name, Dorcas, was esteemed in her community and in fact is the only woman described in the New Testament as a “disciple”. [There are plenty of female followers of Jesus but of this woman alone is the noun “disciple” used. Yet for all that, the story of her being raised from death at the hand or the prayer of Peter is the only reference to Tabitha in the whole of the Bible.]

But just because we don't know for sure what happened with Tabitha that day does not mean that the story in Acts 9 has no point to it. That would be like saying that just because there may not have ever been an actual race between a hare and a tortoise there is nothing we can learn from that story.

I want to suggest this morning that the value of this story is not in its once upon a time character. Its value is not so much that a woman called Tabitha was once raised from death, and enabled to stand on her feet, but that in the power of God those who are without life can receive life, those whose being is moribund can be animated, those who are caught in life-sapping spirals can be released from seemingly certain self-destruction, and those who are trapped in lifestyles which offer no peace can be healed. That's the more important message of Biblical Christianity. It is a message that in the power of God all people can come to stand on their own feet.

Biblical Christianity is good news about bringing life where there is death; love where there is hate, healing where there is brokenness. People in parlous situations can be brought to again stand on their feet like Tabitha was. And when people are able to stand on their feet after all seemed lost that can be as much a miracle as the Tabitha story is. When people or communities make their way out of the traps of poverty, when drug addicts stay clean, when someone badly hurt by a broken relationship is able to make a fresh start, when feuding neighbours are reconciled, when despairing people find meaning or hope again, that is as much a good news story or miracle as is the story of Tabitha. For in those stories too we find the hand of God, bringing new life, new hope and a new capacity to stand on our feet with our head held high.

Let me repeat: the great word of the Christian faith is not death, but resurrection, or new life.

We began our service today with a paraphrase of the 23rd psalm. Most of you would be familiar with the traditional and much-loved words “The Lord is my shepherd”, but this

morning we used another form of words, "Lord you are my guide in the wilderness". From time to time many of us do feel that we are in a wilderness of sorts. It might be social, or financial, or vocational, or spiritual or some other form of being in a wilderness. But the important thing we say in the 23rd psalm is that the Lord is present with us in the wilderness, and guides us through it. Being in the wilderness is not a good place to be, but the Tabitha story tells us that even when we are in the darkest of places and feel that there is no hope, God's Spirit is there to get us back on our feet. That's very exciting.

So I suppose my sub-theme this morning is drawn from the Tabitha story. It is about getting to stand on one's own feet. Some even argue that it was the tragic story of Gallipoli that led to Australia for the first time standing on its own feet as an independent nation. We can think of all those young men who died on the shores of Gallipoli on this day in 1915 "for our tomorrow they gave their today", that Australia could stand on its own feet. Out of the tragedy good came. Out of even the fires of war there new life can come, even if it is a long time coming. I say it again, for the Christian death is not the last word, but resurrection.

Out of all our death experiences – physical, social, emotional, spiritual, or whatever – new life comes, courtesy of God. Easter happens again and again as Christ breaks through all the barriers to get us back on our feet. The resurrection continues.

Finally, let me take you back to today's reading from the Book of Revelation. In it John has a vision of seeing a great crowd of people singing and dancing round the throne of God. One of the angels explains it to John in these words:

These are they who have come out of the great ordeal. For this reason God will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

My friends, may that vision be yours to both anticipate and to experience now.

To the praise of the name that is timeless and the love that is boundless.

Amen.

Rev Allan Thompson

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