**13th July 2014**

**Acts 9:36–43**

Brazil has been in mourning since Tuesday’s night when their national football team was humiliated by Germany in the World Cup semi-final 7-1. The Germans scored five goals in 20 minutes – in the first half – it was embarrassing. Julio Caesar the Brazilian goalkeeper apparently has repetitive strain injury in his back from picking the ball out of the back of the net so many times. To rub insult into injury, their arch rivals Argentina now play in the final tonight against Germany in Brazils’ national stadium and ‘spiritual home’ – the Maracana. 100 million Brazilians are cheering on the Germans! A country that was once regarded as the standard for attractive attacking football has been brought low with their reputation dead and buried and needing resurrection.

Hopes get dashed. Tragedies happen. Reputations are lost. People who made a difference can disappear. Faith can crumble and despair and negativity set in.

Our bible reading today has all those elements and we will look at how the power of Christ can bring new life.

For the rest of this month we are looking at some stories of the early church and their adventures after the resurrection of Jesus. These stories over the next three Sundays are about how Peter took the mission of Jesus out into the world and what he encountered there. As we encounter these stories we will reflect on how we encounter the world in the light of the resurrection of Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ caused a seismic change in the life of the world. We have been disrupted by this event ever since. Life since the resurrection is never dull and never predictable. Resurrection life and hope continues to break out in our midst.

The story begins with the author of Acts identifying

Tabitha (from an Aramaic word meaning “gazelle”) as a *mathetria*, the feminine form of the Greek word for “disciple.” This designation is given to no other person in the New Testament. We all know Jesus had twelve male disciples – and some churches have used that fact to discriminate against the leadership of women. The Church of England will debate tomorrow at their General Synod whether to allow women to be bishops. Jesus only chose male disciples – goes the crude argument. Well Tabitha is specifically mentioned as a female disciple – shock, horror!

Tabitha lets her light shine. She serves among the widows of her community. Acts does not tell us whether Tabitha is, herself, a widow. The emphasis is on her work among them, witnessing to the Risen Christ in word and deed.

In many places, the Bible declares God’s desire for widows to be treated with kindness and justice. The frequency of these urgings suggests that such mandates were not always heeded. Widows remained vulnerable. Thus, Tabitha ministers with

women who are routinely overlooked.

Many in our society are overlooked. The political agenda is to get the economy back on track and create wealth – especially so it seems for those who are already wealthy. Provisions for the mentally ill, the disabled, those in nursing homes, those in hospices, those in prison and those released into the community, those who are young and unemployed are well down the agenda. The issue of poverty in the developing world and its links to climate change and debt and tax evasion by multi nationals are not even discussed. When I look at the ministry of Jesus he reached out to those whom society had overlooked. God’s priorities are seldom with the rich, nor the comfortable – they will always be able to look after themselves. God’s priorities are always about how are you caring for the most vulnerable? This disciple of Jesus, this woman disciple – is known for her acts of kindness and charity. Her heart is in the right place – she has a heart after God’s heart and that affects how she lives her life and uses her time.

Tabitha had a big heart. She had been transformed by the gospel. Jesus had changed her – she was a disciple. She filled her days with acts of kindness and charity. She did good – she helped the poor. In so doing, she weaves a community who grieves her death, celebrates her gifts, and witnesses her restoration to life.

Stephen Covey in his book 7 Habits of Effective People’ says begin with the end in mind – what kind of tributes what kind of response, what kind of things said about you would you want mourners at your funeral to say. It’s a salient and sobering question. What a testimony to the life of this woman Tabitha that the widows come out to mourn their loss. She made a difference to her world.

The apostles and the evangelist may make the important decisions and have the high profile adventures, and preach great sermons and write great letters. The likes of myself, the clergy, we may get our photos in the newspapers and our names on the notice boards but the people like Tabitha are the beating heart of the people of God. This simple ministry of sewing and knitting and stitching and generally providing for the needs of her community – is celebrated in this passage. This ordinary person made an extraordinary contribution to the kingdom of God. There are many Tabitha’s among us – it is glorious.

I was moved by a story in Reform magazine this month about how Christians in Lebanon are helping Syrian refugees. They ought to have shunned the Syrians because for some 30 years Syrian forces have occupied large parts of Lebanon and were instrumental in bombings and assassinations. But with the bloody civil war in Syria causing a death toll of around 200,000 it is estimated that nearly 9 million Syrians, half the population have been displaced. Three million going to neighbouring countries. At the forefront of the response in Lebanon is the church. Lebanese Christians, from Catholic to Baptist have responded generously to the crisis. The report focuses on a tiny ramshackle Baptist church in the al-Bequa valley, called the True Vine Church. For two years it has been handing out food parcels, medical aid and other assistance to hundreds of refugees who have come to its doors. The British based charity ‘Embrace the Middle East’ are helping them. The most common thing they hear as the refugee’s queues for their food parcel is: ‘you do know we are Muslims, don’t you?’ they refugees can’t quite believe that they are receiving help from their Lebanese Christian neighbours.

Sometimes the involvement of Christians in public services raises objections. Atheists and secularists are suspicious that the church has ulterior motives. There may well be those in our community who are suspicious of us going into partnership with the town council to provide a youth centre for Dursley.

Steve Chalke head of Oasis a huge Christian social enterprise in the UK that runs schools, hospitals, sports centre and the like maintains that though Christian faith is personal, it is never private. "There is a widespread, popular myth that unless faith is restricted to the private sphere, it will inevitably lead to intolerance and extremism. But the reality could not be more different. Beneath the headlines of religious fanaticism and intolerance are the untold stories of countless individuals who, motivated by their personal faith, choose to work for the betterment of our society. For them, faith may be personal, but it is never private. Like the thousands of churches and other faith groups up and down the country that commit to improving the lives of society's most vulnerable - running homeless hostels, alcohol recovery programmes and youth mentoring schemes in response to the needs they see around them."

Chalke claims that; "Intolerance and extremism are more to do with fundamentalism, than faith. Indeed, the memory of the 20th century is forever scarred by the fundamentalism and intolerance of communism, whose regimes not only left millions dead, but impoverished and excluded many more." He maintains that, "Without public faith, there would not have been a civil rights movement in the US or a Jubilee debt cancellation campaign [[*sic*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sic)] in the UK. Both these movements were inspired and led by people of faith who decided that what they believed about God and humanity should impact on the world around them."[[30]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Chalke#cite_note-30)

Tabitha dies and there is much grief. They call for Peter to come and pray for her. Why is Peter called to this person and not to others who have died? Tabitha cannot have been the only follower of Jesus to have died in the first years of the Christian movement? Why do some people get called to a new work by an inner prompting, others by an angelic visitor, and others by an ordinary messenger coming from a neighbouring town? There are many mysteries attached to the stories in the Bible. If Luke the writer of Acts had wanted to tell us that God keeps people guessing, he couldn’t have done it much better.

Peter is summoned by the disciples in Joppa when Tabitha

dies. Peter comes to the upper room, where Tabitha’s body has been laid. He turns out all the grieving and weeping widows. Healing always needs a positive faith-full and hopeful environment. The narrator blends words and memories from Jesus’ ministry into this story. The raising of Tabitha strongly resembles Jesus’ raising of a little girl in Mark 5:35–41. The parallel is striking between the words of Peter (“Tabitha, get up”) and Jesus (“*talitha cum*,” Aramaic for “little girl, get up”).

Peter, too, engages in ministry, following the example of Jesus. Peter heals in the name of Jesus Christ. This miracle is a sign of the salvation of Jesus. Because of his confidence in the power of Christ, Peter dared to address the diseased man Aeneas in the verses before this story, and the dead woman Tabitha in this story, with the same word ‘anastethi ‘Get up’. Anistemi is the root verb used of God raising Jesus. Like the gospel miracles of Jesus they are signs that one day all will be raised to new life. Tabitha may have been resuscitated to her old life – but she will only die again – but one day all will receive new life.

We have lost many Tabithas – dearly loved believers who did good – we miss them and wonder how we will cope. But they rise up – they are not lost. We have good news. Jesus lives, in the midst of resurrection, and many are open to the power of Jesus in this life to find new life.

Later this week the House of Lords will debate assisted suicide. Lord Carey the former Archbishop of Canterbury said yesterday said he had changed his mind on the matter and now believed it wasn’t un-Christian to allow terminally ill people who are in great pain, to end their life. The present archbishop of Canterbury is still against the assisted suicide believing that it would be exploited and force the vulnerable to do the decent thing and not be a burden and die quickly and that it would undermine the sanctity of life. It’s an extremely difficult debate and shows once again the difficult our society has in debating end of life issues, partly brought about by our tremendous medical capacity to prolong and save life. I was speaking to my sister in law who is a manager of nursing staff in the NHS and last week they had a talk from medical staff in the military about their ability to save countless many more injured soldiers in battle. However the real battle for life comes as these soldiers then have to face a lifetime of severe disability. Many wish they had just died on the battlefield. There are no easy answers here – but let there always be compassion.

The debates of the church, often allow wider society to have that debate vicariously. They listen in to our discussions and use our discussions for wider public comment. The united reformed Church’s General Assembly met last weekend. They talked about same sex marriage – something that I may refer to next week – just to give you prior warning! It is an issue that despite the dominant media opinion isn’t an issue that has widespread common agreement. The church is often used by the media to voice the objections of wider society and the debate for and against.

Our General Assembly also discussed the future of our denomination. There was a very wordy document about what is the Spirit saying to the church – the future of the URC. It believed we would live and not die. It offered six scenarios for our future from ‘steady as she goes – being realistic about decline ; uniting with other churches; developing pastorate churches of 10 to 15 congregations grouped round one large central church; new forms of churches; and even cyber churches :online communities. They encouraged Assembly to value our identity. They asked people to name the things that the URC is passionate about. Here are a selection of replies:

Freedom in Christ, freedom to choose and believe, to worship; each one tested against the authority of scripture and church meeting

Conciliar decision making, challenging us all to seek the mind of Christ together.

Informality

Commitment to social justice

Inclusivity and tolerance

The discernment we exercise in calling a minster

The sharing of gifts and leadership, partially our eldership

The relationship to the Word of god in the Bible

Our ecumenical commitment and track record of taking the initiate in bringing churches together to work together

But the report also admitted that many of our churches have a sense of despair and negativity because they feel in decline and helpless and hopeless. It also said that some focus on details and activities instead of the bigger picture. They reaffirmed that the focus is always on the joy of life in Christ, the energy that the Holy Spirit offers and the vision of what God holds in front of us. It is out of vision that strategy emerges and out of strategy that management develops.

If I can translate that: what they were suggesting is that for new life and renewal it needs a sense of person renewal – going back to our faith in Christ and catching again the vision for what our Christian life is all about before we then start ,making plans and doing activities.

Tabitha dies. Sometimes churches die. They have done good. They have been places of kindness and charity but now all they have are the memories. People stand around like the widows around Tabitha’s house, crying and reminiscing, caught up in sentimental nostalgia, thinking back to all the things they used to do, the way things used to be. Sometimes communities express regret when churches close – though they haven’t supported the church when it was open! And people in the church can feel angry and resentful – they have tried to do good but no-one could be bothered, not enough people gave their help, time and money.

In the Tabitha story, Peter is sent for and the first thing he does is send all the mourners outside. If you really want new life you can’t be looking behind you at the past and mourning your loss.

The next thing Peter does is he gets down on his knees and prays. He goes back to the source of power and renewal.

We may be feeling dead inside. Our life and energy have gone. We may be burnt out with acts of kindness and charity – to the extent that we are aggrieved, like the mourners of Tabitha, in tears, look at what we have done – for what good.

Time to put all those cares and concerns to one side and get down on your knees and pray – wait for that word from the Lord: ‘Get up’. Wait to open your eyes to a new dawn and a new sense of life.

News of Tabitha’s raising spreads, and “many believed in the

Lord.” This account illustrates the unfolding theme in Acts of the ever-widening circle of the church and the advancement of the kingdom of God bringing healing, justice and peace. May the Risen Christ continue to be at work in the world!