

Easter Sermon on the theme of Acts 9

It ain't called Joppa any more,
that place on the Jewish coast
where Tabitha ran her clothing club
for destitute widows.
Since then Hebrew has become all feely-touchy
and has tried to soften its harsh consonants
by slipping an h in front of them.
t has evolved to th,
b to bh, pronounced v as in bar mitzvah,
p to ph, pronounced f.
So Joppa
has become Joffa,
but the slight lengthening of the word
has dictated a vowel change,
o to a,
so Joffa has become Jaffa
and turned orange like the rest of the world.
It's funny how things evolve.

Joppa now Jaffa would be the Scarborough of Israel,
Lydda, where Peter's roadshow had touched base,
would be like Pickering,
15 miles in land.
Peter would have a five hour walk
over rough country
to get there;
the men who fetched him a ten hour walk.
Not the tightest turn-around time
for a 999 summons.
Tabitha really would be stone-cold dead
by the time Peter got there,
surrounded by widows galore
wailing no doubt with grief at the death of their friend;
but also not a little distraught
that their personal M & S supply
had ceased production.

Peter proves a man of action.
First, he puts the wailing widows out,

an action which every church leader
must have envied ever since!

Secondly

he prays
and says in Aramaic,

Tabitha cum,

Tabitha, get up!

Hang on a minute,

it's not just Joppa that's changed its name.

Bells are ringing at the back of your mind
of another dead female in an upper room
surrounded by mourners weeping and wailing.

Memories are stirring

of another man,

not Peter

but Jesus

putting the mourners out

and saying in Aramaic

Talitha cum,

Talitha, *little girl*, get up!

Joppa has changed to Jaffa

Talitha has changed Tabitha.

Something smells fishy

and it ain't just the Billingsgate odour
on Peter's hands.

What's going on here.

Well, it's Mark's Gospel

that preserves those Aramaic words

Talitha cum.

Commentators claim that Luke

kept that detail on file,

as it were,

and then recast the miracle

and made Peter rather than Jesus the star of the show.

Somehow along the way

Talitha,

Aramaic for little girl

was changed to Tabitha,

Aramaic for gazelle,
a popular girl's name
(and Cumbrian for kitten!),
flagging up the message
that the same miracles that Jesus performed
can be performed by Peter,
and by implication the rest of the Church

I don't know,
something makes me uneasy
about this explanation.

Luke' story has the ring of truth about it,
Tabitha called Dorcas,
the destitute widows,
whose dire need
to its credit
the Early Church met head on,
the washing of the body.
I've spent so many years researching
Textual Criticism

that I can almost sniff out

an authentic story
from a concocted one.

Like those Christian Aid tales,
such as
Martha has to walk 58 miles
over the Andes with a bucket of milk
for her family of 13 children and 42 yaks.

They're making that up!

But I don't sense that this tale
of Tabitha being raised at Joppa
is being made up.

Something about it rings true.

And I can't believe that if Jesus was
who Luke thought he was
that Luke would muck about with his words
and put them into Peter's mouth.
I admit that I slightly sexed up
the words of the Archbishop of Wales

on last week's bulletin,
as I often sexed up the words of David Hope
when I was his chaplain.
You get into the habit.
But I never once sexed up the words of John Habgood.
To me John Habgood was God Direct,
and I could never say things
a tenth as well as he could.
Similarly I just can't see Luke doing that.

But we still have the problem
of Tabitha cum and Talitha cum.
I wonder if it worked the other way,
that Peter,
a minor planet,
performed a miracle,
the details of which in the course of time
came into the gravitational field
of the more major planet Jesus,
a veritable Saturn to Peter's Mars.

Let me give you true example.
John Sentamu's just finished doing
a whistle-stop tour of the 26 deaneries of the York Diocese,
something I did with David Hope
12 years ago.
To be honest,
we steamed through places too quickly
to have anything but a fleeting encounter,
and some visits,
like the one to the Portaloo factory in York,
were distinctly bizarre.
Often it was all a show,
a front,
and bored old me used to go off-piste
and steal behind the facade.

I remember one visit to a village school
not far from here.
All was spic and span and glitter,
with well-dressed children

with bright faces
asking the Archbishop adoring questions.
Bored,
I wandered behind one of the screens.
There on a mat was a tiny little boy,
looking deadly pale,
curled up asleep.
'What's a matter with that little boy,'
I whispered to the headmistress.
'Oh, he's a twin,
he's prone to severe epileptic fits,
we just let him sleep them off.'
With that she returned to the archiepiscopal roadshow.
I remained,
standing by the little lad
feeling so utterly sorry for him,
the Cinderella left out of this morning's ball.
By weird coincidence
our Gospel reading at our Morning Prayers
had been Jesus healing an epileptic boy.

As I stood there helpless,
I felt so bogus,
such a fraud.

Years later I chanced upon that headmistress,
who was still full of the visit and all its razzmatazz.
'The little boy with the fits,
what happened to him,' I asked.
'Oh the funny thing is,'
the headmistress replied
matter of fact
'ever since the Archbishop's visit
he never had a fit again.
The Archbishop's holiness must have cured him.'
'Yes,' I agreed
knowing full well that David Hope
had never even noticed the boy.

What I'm saying is that when miracles happen,
the most holy guy around inevitably takes the credit for them,

whereas that might not actually be quite the case.

I can see how

as time went on,

the detail of Peter's miracle with Tabitha

could have been transposed

to become part of the plethora of miracles

which Jesus performed.

Jesus saying Tabitha cum

to Jairus' dead daughter

would make no sense in the narrative:

'Hang on a minute,

where's that name come from,

nobody mentioned a name?

You must have heard

Talitha cum

rather than Tabitha cum:

little girl, arise.'

It makes some sense.

Clearly miracles were happening

all over the show.

As they should have been

with God in Christ moving around humankind.

And if Peter had the touch of Christ about him,

ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,

then he jolly well should have been raising

Tabithas from their death-beds.

Just one final point.

Comparing the raising of Jairus' daughter

with the raising of Tabitha

is quite fun.

Lots of similarities.

Some differences.

Jairus' daughter was only 12,

Tabitha clearly would be an older woman.

Yet the healing of Jairus' daughter

stars an older woman

who stopped Jesus in his tracks

and was healed when

she touched the hem of his clothes.

So clothes star in that story too.

But the word in Greek that Jesus uses

to stir the dead little girl

is

'εγειρε,

get up,

a wake up call.

The word in Greek that Peter uses

to stir the dead Tabitha

is

'αναστηθι,

be resurrected:

Anastasis

is Easter in Greece

and the Eastern Orthodox Church,

Anastasia

is Easter Child,

Resurrection Girl.

Something has changed

between the raising of Jairus' daughter

and the raising of Tabitha,

and that is the rising of Jesus.

No longer is bringing the dead back to life

something that bucks the trend,

just another miracle,

however marvellous.

Now bringing the dead back to life

is part of being risen with Christ.

It doesn't buck the trend.

It is the trend.

Because of Christ's resurrection

it's not just Tabitha

who has the added name

'αναστηθι,

Easter Child.

We all are given that name

and have a duty

not to weep and wail and moan,

but to act as if we are risen with Christ,
to see ourselves and the world
as nothing less than resurrectable
the stuff of resurrection,
and to live accordingly.
The Church of England
doesn't half send a lot of dead stuff our way
to practise resurrection on!

'My sheep hear my voice,'
Jesus declares in our Gospel.
Christ's voice has the twang of Easter about it
which Peter must have caught to raise Tabitha.
Our Easter duty and our Easter joy
is to recognise that twang
and replicate it
in our lives.