

This is what religion should be like?

Robert Davidson, Professor of Old Testament at Glasgow and Aberdeen University, once told the story of the time that he had been to watch probably the most famous film ever that related to his own subject, the Old Testament, when he went to see the Cecil B DeMille biblical epic, "The 10 Commandments".

The way he told it, it didn't sound like Professor Robert Davidson was terribly keen to go, what would Hollywood do to his beloved Old Testament, his Old Testament of lecture theatres and big Hebrew dictionaries, of the subtlety of Old Testament texts, and of hearing a story and of allowing your own imagination to fill in the gaps.

And then he goes to the Cinema, and what he gets is the complete opposite of subtle, the booming voices of Charlton Heston's Moses and Yul Brenner's Rameses, the huge sets in Egypt, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the fire come down from the mountain, and the Ten Commandments themselves – God who cannot be approached but utters those famous Thou Shalt Nots – Thou Shalt not take for yourself a graven image, thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not commit adultery.

When Professor Robert Davidson came out from the cinema there were two women in front of him – he remembered that one said to the other
"Well that's what religion really ought to be like?"

To which Robert Davidson had thought
"This was the most irreligious movie he had ever seen."

I think in its bombast, its subtlety, its portrayal of a distant, demanding forbidding God
People were wanting this kind of God
But the God of the Bible was so much more different than what he wanted.

And yet it I find it hard not to sympathise with these two woman in that queue – no doubt used to sitting in boring sermons, singing hymns that felt lifeless, and a God who seemed consigned to the past, I can feel their yearning, for that film to be a little bit like the film of the Commandments, wanting a faith that was going to win Oscars with its state of the art special effects, rather than send them to sleep.

I think that one of the questions that is being asked in the book of Acts, that rings through its chapters in the aftermath of Easter, is "is religion consigned to the past?"

And more specifically "Is Easter consigned to the past?"

Because most of us when we hear the Easter story kind of thing
"That is what religion really ought to be like".

Is that moment when the tomb is opened, when Jesus body moves back into the world to reanimate and revitalise and redeem his disciples; is that a one-off, a great story for those

who were lucky enough to be there, and is the closest we can get is in hearing the story again in other people's lives; like reading it on the dusty pages of a book, but never with the power of that first tomb, or Cecil B DeMille's 10 commandments.

When we read in the story of Dorcas or Tabitha, two young men are sent from the disciples in Joppa to Peter in Lydda, they are being asked to help with a woman who has just died, - Dorcas or Tabitha – and they ask to Peter
“Do not hesitate, can you come with us”

And they are really asking
“Can you also bring Easter with us”

“Can you also bring old time religion with us.”

The Story of Dorcas or Tabitha

The story of Tabitha which is Jewish name, or Dorcas which is the Greek translation – meaning Gazelle, is the story of a remarkable woman who is part of the Christian community in Joppa – what is now called Jaffa.

She is the only woman in the whole New Testament to bear the female name for disciple, disciples we might call her.

She is full of good deeds and charitable acts – the fact that she was able to give much to charity, and to make many items of clothing suggests that she was a woman of some relative wealth. Luke is keen to show that the Jesus movement, which begins amongst the poorest of Israel, with male disciples, is also a story for women who are wealthy and live in the Greek world, it's a story of disciples and discipleses.

So Dorcas is this woman who is full of goodness, full of charity. Perhaps you know someone like Tabitha, perhaps people might even say that about you.

But she gets sick and she dies. Because that is what happened – those who help, one day need the help themselves. Those who care for the sick, one day themselves need cared for.

And for some reason, people are particularly keen not to accept this, particularly when they hear that Peter is nearby, so they send for him and ask him to come quickly.

There is something interesting here, even though Tabitha is dead, they believe that something can still be done – it's a curious mix of faith and anxiety – come to us Peter, they ask, believing he might be able to do something – I mean what can anyone do for a dead woman but raise her – it's a question of most remarkable faith, but come quickly, because you might be able to do something for dead people, but only if they have been dead for a few days, leave it too long and even you might not be able to do something.

You might be able to do Easter again
But come quickly – because there are limits.

So they send for Peter, and in doing so they are really asking for Easter to be made real in Joppa, just as it was in Jerusalem.

And that I think is the prayer that many of us live with – can Easter be made real, in my place, in my pain, with the people whom I have lost?

That's the question that is being asked of Peter, and the answer is that in Peter, yes, Easter does come back, because the power of Easter is *always* here.

It takes new shapes, but it always comes back.

So Peter comes back, and he is shown the body of Tabitha, and just like Jesus did when he raised Jairus Daughter, he put everyone out of the room, and then Just like Jesus did – there is only syllable of a difference – Jesus said to Jairus' daughter "Talitha Koum", and to Tabitha, Peter says "Tabitha Koum".

And the word that Peter says to her – Get Up,
Is also the same word that means resurrection.

This is Easter again, this is Jesus again, and it is happening in the life of Peter.

I imagine those two women at the cinema
And instead imagine them amongst the crowd of widows
Seeing Tabitha resurrected
I think they would have left behind any ambition
To recreate the 10 Commandments
Or even recreate Easter
I think they would have seen that Easter was still happening
In ways that weren't the same as the past
But in ways that were still Easter.

I want to think of three ways in which this Dorcas was like Easter, but different.

Difference Number 1 - It was Asked For

No one ever asked for the first Easter
Because you don't ask for something you don't think is possible.
Easter happened in a place where everyone had given up on hope entirely.

That wasn't the case with Tabitha.

You have this thing where she dies and immediately they send messengers for Peter, to do something.

I can't help but think that something about this woman's life, Tabitha's life, changed the people around her, beyond giving them money, and making them clothes,

Beyond her life which was full of good deeds and charitable giving,
In that life which was so distinguished that it earns the New Testament's only use of the
word Disciples.

There is something that made them believe in Easter more,
Something in her living more than her speaking it would appear.
So that when she does die,
People have enough faith to send people for Peter.

The lesson seems to be that a life of kindness and goodness, engenders hope and
expectancy in God in the people around you.

This story also tells us to be looking for the possibility for Easter everywhere. Not to believe
that the best of religion is confined to the Past, confined to Sinai, to Easter Morning, or even
to the films. And not to believe that faith is dry and theoretical either.

I think of those brothers being sent for Peter, to do something for a woman who has died.
There is a determination to believe that Easter can reappear, even in the most dead of
places.

And I think we are asked to consider for ourselves where the deadness has crept in, where
the giving up has happened.

You should have at least one or two places in your life where you stake your hope on Easter
– I think of my former Session Clerk desperate that she's her granddaughter again- lost to a
manipulative relationship; and I cannot escape it, my desire for the Church of Scotland, for
our congregations to experience resurrection.

If you do not have at least two or three places where you are desperate for Easter, then your
faith is not hopeful enough... you have consigned the best of religion to the past. Do not
make that mistake – be Easter watchers again, watch for it, hope for it, give your heart to it,
risk your heart being broken, but look for that shape again, that Easter power.

That you will say to that which is dead, "Rise, Arise, Arise"

Peter

Notice too the change in Peter here.

This is a man who was broken by his denials
Excluded by his own guilt
Still struggling to believe in resurrection and future, weeks after Easter had happened

This is a remarkable moment for him,
This thing where he echoes Jesus, that moment when Jesus asked the room to cleared
whilst he raised Jairus daughter – this is now Peter doing the same.

Peter has become as Jesus.
The life of Jesus flows through him.

Open yourself to this possibility
That when you live your life according to the calling that Christ has given you
That when you open yourself to the Spirit moving through you
That when you do what Peter did here and simply kneeled, prayed, and then turned to the
body
Tabitha Coom
He was as Jesus Christ.

There is this remarkable thing that Jesus said we would do even greater miracles than him.
Be Jesus. You too can be Jesus.

There's this fabulous song from Nicaragua
The angels cannot change a world of hurt of pain
Into a world of love
Of Justice and of peace.

I think of times lately where I hope, I pray, I might have been Jesus

So where are you called to be Jesus
Do not underestimate the power of that
Give not yourself to this half-heartedly, or disbelievingly.

Be as Peter was as Jesus.

Widening

And finally, I want us to notice the widening of this story.

We have confined Christian faith too much to our own class, our own ilk
And there was an energy in early Christianity to do this
To stay confined to Judaism
But what you sense here is the promise that news of Christ will come to the ends of the
earth, so it has to break out the confines.

I hasn't totally done it in this story
Tabitha is Jewish
But she's living in a Gentile town
She also has a Greek name
She's on a border

Her neighbours are going to hear about this
And I'm quite sure it wasn't Jewish women in amongst that group of widows, Tabitha will
have helped many, which is why I am sure she had a Greek as well as a Jewish name.

This is going to be blown wide open in the next chapter when Peter eats with the Gentile Cornelius, but for now let Tabitha, Dorcas be our reminder that this is a faith which has to leap across boundaries, to go over to the neighbour we did not expect.

So once again, what are the boundaries you are called to cross over with your faith, where is it meant to go that nobody expected; or can you be a boundary person like Tabitha or Dorcas on either side of the divide.

Let us pray for this too, that our faith goes to those who are not Churchy,
To those with rough accents
Or very very refined accents
To those with scepticism
Or those who did not believe that the Church could ever be for them
Is there anyone you could invite.

Because this story,
It is too good to keep in the past
It is too good to keep to ourselves

AMEN