

How long, O Lord, must we wait?

*A sermon by Alison Sampson on John 10:22-30 and Acts 9:36-43
South Yarra Community Baptist Church, 17 April 2016*

"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." So begged the Jews in the portico of the temple. Can you hear the poignancy, the yearning, in their question? How long, O Lord? How long until a Messiah will come and sweep through this city, and make everything right? How long until the corrupt are thrown out of power, the violent contained, the poor fed, and the world restored? How long until political leaders demonstrate compassion? How long until religious leaders repent for the damage they have inflicted? How long until asylum seekers are freed from detention? How long until public schools and hospitals are well-funded and well-run? How long until children in foster care are returned to stable, healthy families? How long until Australia's First Peoples enjoy the same life expectancy as other Australians? How long, O Lord, must we wait?

Like the Jews in John's gospel, I think many of us yearn for answers to questions like these. They hoped for a Lion of Judah; we hope for a prince on a white horse to come charging into the city to put an end to all the corruption and violence—or, at least, a political leader who is wise enough and strong enough and farsighted enough and kind enough to act benevolently. And if that does not happen in our lifetime, then one day we will die and go to heaven, where everything will be all right. Until then, though, how long, O Lord, must we wait?

But not everyone asks this question. The stories about the disciples in Acts show little of this wondering. Instead, they just get on with things: preaching, teaching, healing, exhorting, encouraging, praying, sharing wealth, caring for the poor, and singing. And I wonder whether they don't ask the questions, because they are not wondering when the Messiah will come.

For in tonight's story from the book of Acts, we see something remarkable. We have only just celebrated the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Now, we see Peter raising someone from the dead. Only a few weeks ago, we heard Peter deny Jesus; and again and again in the gospels he didn't get it—but here he is, raising someone out of death and restoring her to life.

And not just anyone. He is raising a woman, who is described, first, as a 'disciple'. She is then named, and she's named twice: Tabitha and Dorcas. Both names mean 'gazelle'. Tabitha is the Aramaic; Dorcas is the Greek. Naming her twice tells us something interesting: first, that the community at Joppa was bilingual and multicultural. More than that, though, by naming her so precisely Luke tells us that Tabitha was important, and that it was important that the audience knew exactly who he was referring to. In fact, some commentators suggest that this shows that Tabitha was a community leader. Whether or not this is true, her death is so significant that the other disciples at Joppa send for Peter and beg him to come urgently. He arrives to find widows grieving, and they show him the clothing that Tabitha has made for them.

Now, this is non-trivial. For the most part, you and I don't know who made our clothes, and beyond a slight twinge when a factory collapses in Bangladesh, we couldn't really care less whether the makers lived or died. But we are not first century Mediterranean widows; we are not the poor. We are not at risk of starvation if our primary source of

support dies. Our children are fed; our feet are shod; our homes are dry; and our lives are not constantly overshadowed by death.

A month or so ago, we heard about the death of Lazarus, and you will remember that this left his sisters Mary and Martha without financial support. The death of their male family member meant the end of their own lives, for there was no welfare, no pension, and as women they had no right to work. And so, in raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus also gave Mary and Martha their lives back. Here in Acts, we find another person who has been caring for women in dire need: Tabitha. The story tells us that "she was devoted to good works and acts of charity." In other words, her life overflowed with compassion and care for those around her.

In reply to the Jews in the temple who wanted to know "How long, O Lord?", Jesus said, "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish..."

Now, when we think of 'eternal life', we often think of a life hereafter, something quite separate from this life and this age. It is a deeply-embedded relic of Greco-Roman philosophy; and it has been cemented in our highly individualistic age, which usually understands salvation as individual, personal, and in some second life-to-come.

However, this is not the Hebraic worldview. In the Hebraic worldview, the world in which Jesus lived and taught, there were two ages. One was the present age, that world that we see around us, with all its violence, corruption, and despoliation of the earth. The other was the coming age: God's age, the age of *shalom*, which brings peace, restoration, and healing. In this understanding, we will not be rescued out of the turmoil of the present age; we will not be removed from the earth. Instead, the earth itself will be renewed; and in that healing of all creation, we too will be healed.

The age of renewal is not separate from this age. There is no second planet earth waiting for us to arrive in our shiny spaceships. Instead, the present age will be subverted and transformed from within; this earth will be healed in the here and now. And this new age, this renewal of all creation, arrived with the resurrection, and it is unfolding even as we speak.

This is the abundant life that Jesus' sheep recognise and participate in. Foolish, betraying, enthusiastic Peter participates in this life—God's new age—and raises Tabitha from the dead. The new community at Joppa, which honours women, cares for its widows, loves beyond biological boundaries, speaks multiple languages, and welcomes people from many backgrounds, participates in this life—God's new age—as it witnesses to a new community, a new way of being together. And Tabitha, whose life overflows with goodness and mercy, participates in this life—God's new age—a life so abundant, that even death cannot stop her. As Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them life in abundance, and they will never perish."

How long must we wait, O Lord? How long must we wait? The early disciples and the Acts communities knew the answer: The wait is over. Jesus is alive, and he lives in all those who hear his voice and follow him.

Jesus is alive when, like the community at Joppa, we join with people from many different backgrounds to form a church. When we love across differences such as age

or race, class or culture, physical or intellectual capability, gender identity or sexual preference—Jesus is alive!

Jesus is alive when, like the early disciples, we honour those who care for the poor as greatly as we honour those who engage in more public ministries. When we raise up those who make soup and sew clothes and knit teddies and care for foster children and work in development and tend the sick and give sacrificially—Jesus is alive!

Jesus is alive when, like Tabitha, we use our gifts to serve the vulnerable; and when our serving provides a witness to a life so abundant that others come to faith—Jesus is alive!

There is no more waiting; there is no more longing. We are gathered here, as we gather every week, to “celebrate the life that death could not hold, the life that Jesus has shared among his community through the centuries and shares with us now.”* So let us radiate resurrection in all that we say and do. Let us proclaim with our words and our lives that death has no dominion over us. Jesus is alive, within us and among us; and God’s new age is unfolding. Amen. Ω

**Iona Community Worship Book (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1991): 67.*