

Barnabas and Dorcas

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 October 2024

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] I think one of the early Methodist hymn books says that we should sing lustily and with a good courage.

! I think we probably manage that at least. Let's pray before we turn to this passage. Heavenly Father, as we come to this story from long ago, we read of characters who are long dead and yet who speak to us today.

We pray that we might behold wondrous things from your law in the name of Jesus. Amen. So we reach a major turning point here in Luke's narrative.

As we do that, as we move on through Acts, let's remind us of Luke's purpose. And the key theme, as we've seen, is the spread of the gospel.

First in Judea, and then to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. But interleaved with that, we find another thread.

[1:20] That is, as the church becomes increasingly more diverse culturally, how can they maintain unity together? In the middle of this story, we somehow get this description of the raising of Dorcas, sandwiched between these two major events.

In chapter 9, 1 to 18, we describe the conversion of Saul, who's soon to be renamed Paul, of course. Preachers get very confused as to whether to talk about Paul or Saul, so it means the same.

Paul was the great evangelist to the Gentiles, non-Jews. We pick up this story again in chapter 11, verse 19. But in chapter 10, we have a very long, detailed description of Peter's visit to the household of a Roman officer, Cornelius.

And that we should not call unclean what God has called clean.

There's also a lot of geography going on here, you may have noticed. The action moves up and down the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean, to Damascus, to Caesarea, Antioch further north, to Tarsus, round the top of the Mediterranean a bit.

[3:01] In chapter 9, it's almost as if Luke is pausing for breath. Verse 31, he talks of a time of peace. Briefly, the action returns to the vicinity of Jerusalem.

Lido is only about 25 miles, 40 kilometers northwest of Jerusalem. Joppa is a little bit further on the coast, more or less where Tel Aviv is now.

And in a sense, the raising of Dorcas here seems almost a distraction from the main action. Come on, Luke, we want to know what happens next.

It almost seems strange that Luke tells us about Dorcas at all. She's a helpful woman with a talent, apparently, for sewing. But surely she's not mega important.

Surely, Luke, you could skip this bit. Get on to the action. Tell us about Saul or Peter or John, even Stephen or Philip or Barnabas.

[4:10] But do we really need to know about Dorcas? Dorcas, how does she matter in the scheme of things? And yet Luke pauses under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and says, Look, guys, you really need to know about Dorcas.

And she was certainly important enough to the disciples in Joppa. They almost seem to go into panic mode in verses 38 and 39, don't they? What should we do? We're losing her. She's dying. And somebody remembers that Peter is in Joppa. In Lydda, sorry. Just down the road. Yeah, Peter. Peter, we need the apostle himself.

And remarkably, perhaps Peter goes. He doesn't say, I'm too busy. I'm too busy preaching the gospel. I've got more important work to do. When the messages arrive, he picks up his go bag and heads for the coast.

He wants to see for this for himself. He certainly thought this was worth a detour. Sometimes it's suggested that this passage is here because Peter, as an apostle, is reprising the signs of Jesus himself.

[5:30] And I think there is a bit of that. Peter's words to Ananias are similar to those of Jesus to a young man, for instance, in Luke 7, 14, and in similar passages.

And there is a play on words in Acts 9, verse 40. In saying, Tabitha, get up, Peter is reflecting Jesus' words in Mark 5, 41, the raising of Jairus' daughter, when he says, Talitha, little girl, arise. And it may be true that that's why Luke structures his tale this way. And of course, the authentication of Peter as the apostle, as the sub-shepherd under Jesus is important.

Yet there's an awful lot in this description, these descriptions here. And if we make this the main focus, it seems that we can miss other parallels and connections.

So, what to do? I was presented with this passage. How can I make sense of it and not be here for three hours? Which I'm sure you would not appreciate.

[6:38] So, I thought, let's pause from the hectic pace ourselves and take a look at two characters who are not the stars of the show. The stars of the show are Paul and Peter.

But what about those supporting characters? Both of whom found a way to use the talents God had given them in the service of the kingdom.

I'm referring to Barnabas and Dorcas. Barnabas does, of course, have a significant part in the story of Acts. But arguably, this is his finest moment.

Dorcas we meet only here. Yet, as we've seen, Peter considered her worthy of an apostolic diversion. That small church in Joppa was feeling a great loss.

She was important to that church. So, let's look at Barnabas and Dorcas briefly. We first met Barnabas back in Acts 4, where we read, Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement.

[8:02] He sold a field he owned and bought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. So, Barnabas wasn't the man's birth name. It was this nickname, if you like, given them by the apostles themselves.

Son of encouragement. They certainly got that right, didn't they? Barnabas was, of all things, a son of encouragement. Barnabas' great talent seems to have been able to be in the right place at the right time.

Do you notice he was up in Damascus and then he came down to Jerusalem. He's a guy who just seems to know what's going on.

Barnabas always comes with a but. We get it in verse 27. The narrative seems likely to spiral out of control. Barnabas says, stay calm.

In the face of the disciples' understandable fear, he homes in on the relevant facts. He says, you don't need to worry, guys.

[9:18] Saul is on our side now, and I've seen it up in Damascus. This is really God at work. Barnabas is that invaluable person who can see both sides of a situation and thus has a fighting chance of bringing the sides together.

It doesn't always work out. At the end of Acts 15, we read the following. Sometime later, Paul said to Barnabas, let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preach the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them. But Paul did not think it was wise to take him because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

Of course, ever since this, Bible interpreters have been arguing about who was right in this discussion. Well, I'm not going to attempt to answer that question, but it is noticeable that it was Barnabas who was on the side of giving Mark a second chance and encouraging Mark and

encouraging Paul to give Mark a second chance.

[10:48] Barnabas was always the son of encouragement. And back in Acts 9, he was doing exactly the same thing for Paul, wasn't he? He was saying to the believers in Jerusalem, yeah, I know it was started, Paul had been, Saul had been throwing us in jail, but he's on our side now.

He's changed. The Lord has changed him. And in doing so, he changed the world forever. that tension between the Hebraic Jews in Jerusalem and the church in Jerusalem and around and the Hellenistic Jews would always be there to some extent as the focus moves to Damascus and Caesarea and to Antioch.

But because of the Barnabases of this world, it never became a schism. They always said, okay, we do things slightly differently, but we're preaching the same gospel and we love one another. We're all one in Christ Jesus, even if there was the odd cultural difference from time to time. What about Dorcas?

Barnabas? Well, if you think back, immediately after we met Barnabas, we got the story of Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the apostles and more importantly to the Holy Spirit.

[12:28] Sapphira actually means Sapphire, but she was not the treasurer of Proverbs 31. It says, a wife of noble character who can find.

She is worth far more than rubies. Sapphira may have been named after a jewel, but she was no treasure. She was Eve to Ananias' Adam.

Perhaps the deception was her idea in the first place. We don't know. But certainly she shared in her husband's deception. As far as I know, the only second, the second woman who is actually named in Acts, I think, Dorcas is the second woman who we actually have a name for in Acts, I believe, unless I've missed one.

Dorcas is a much better advert for womanhood, isn't she? She was probably a widow, yet she was worth far more than rubies.

We read in Joppa, there was a disciple named Tabitha, which when translated is Dorcas, who was always doing good and helping the poor.

[13:48] Tabitha, which is Aramaic, and Dorcas, which is Greek, both mean gazelle. What's a gazelle? Well, it's a kind of antelope, but it's noted for its speed and agility.

When I was looking it up, I discovered that Adidas has even named a range of sports shoes gazelle. They're graceful animals, but they don't just stand around looking pretty.

They're always on the move, always looking for something to do. And that was very much an appropriate name for Dorcas, wasn't it?

We do not read of a husband, so probably Dorcas was a widow herself. That's kind of hinted at in verse 39. When Peter raises her, he presents her back to the widows.

We're not so for sure, but there's no mention of any other family. And that gives us a hint as to look back again into Acts, doesn't it?

[15:02] Do you remember in Acts 6 verse 1, we read of a dispute between some widows. Some of them, it appears, were being treated unfairly. In fact, this was why the seven deacons were appointed.

Oddly enough, as I spoke on that passage a few weeks ago, and I noted at the time, we're not given any information as to what they actually did about the issue. But here we see Dorcas is a solution, not a problem.

She doesn't define herself as a victim, as we all are inclined to do, aren't we, when we feel we're not getting what we deserve. As I say, Dorcas had probably lost her husband, or whatever her circumstances were.

She doesn't see herself as a victim. She doesn't ask for her entitlement from the handout to the widows. In fact, she contributes to that handout.

She doesn't appear to have been destitute herself. We don't know where she got the resources from. You need certain resources to make garments for sewing, and you need to buy material and equipment stuff.

[16:20] But she does have time to spare, and she uses that time to go about helping. She has the skills and resources to make clothes. How she funded them, we don't know.

Maybe she sold some of the clothes, or we don't know. Maybe, as I say, perhaps she had an independent source of income. Perhaps her husband had left her money or something. We don't know.

She wasn't destitute herself. But she had time, and she had this skill, and she was going to use it to encourage the church. Like Barnabas, she uses her skills and resources to encourage the brothers and sisters.

She had different gifts, but her aim was the same, wasn't it? She exemplifies those words of James, James 2, verses 15 to 17.

Like Barnabas, sorry, suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, go, I wish you well, keep warm and be well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

[17:41] in the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. This is what Barnabas and Dorcas displayed, was faith in action.

Jesus said, by this will all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another. You need to note what Jesus does not say here.

He doesn't say that the evidence of discipleship is miraculous signs. of course, the apostolic signs in Acts 9 do have some value.

They authenticate Peter's apostleship and they help to attract some attention to the message. But the real evidence that God is present in the church is not miracles.

The real evidence is that love which is so ably demonstrated by Barnabas and Dorcas as it does transcending social and cultural barriers.

[19:07] In Acts 6 the cultural differences between the Hebraic and Hellenistic widows threaten to cause a split. In Acts 9 suspicion and mistrust threaten to derail the church's witness.

But Barnabas and Dorcas stood against those barriers overcoming them by love protecting Saul when it became necessary helping those widows who most thought really are not very important but they were important in God's sight.

Dorcas was on the case. What do we find? Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace.

It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. It grew in numbers knowing the fear of the Lord. They were actually encouraged, weren't they, by Barnabas and by Dorcas.

But Luke writes, they were strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. This was the Spirit at work. Biblical love is not a woolly happy feeling.

[20:31] Nowadays you get that dreadful slogan, love is love. As useless slogans go, that has to be a winner. It's completely meaningless. Love is not love, love is whatever you want to make it.

similar to that song, all you need is love. In a sense, that may be true, but what sort of love is it we're talking about here?

Just think about the marriage service for a while. What do we do when we get married? Well, we promise to love our spouse, don't we?

We promise to love each other. But service doesn't just stop there. As it makes clear, this love has structure.

We have other promises that give that love content and meaning. You can think of it, if you like, as a sort of minimum service agreement. Whatever love means, it means at least this.

[21:38] What are those promises? Forsaking all others. When we come to a if we're tempted to infidelity, then the devil whispers, love is love.

We say, no, I won't break that promise I made. It shares resources, doesn't it? For richer, for poorer, if the Lord blesses us with wealth, then we'll share that.

Not say it's mine. We don't have prenups in the marriage service. And if it's for poorer, then we face that together.

We don't, the wife can't walk off and marry somebody richer. They promised to be together for richer and for poorer.

And in sickness and or in health. If we're healthy, then we work together in the work of the Lord. If one of us becomes sick, then the other may be forced into the role of carer.

[23:02] So you've got to be up for that at the beginning when you're 20, because it might not happen until you're 65 or 70. But you're up for that at the beginning.

If that's the situation that the Lord puts you in, then you care for the other in sickness as well as in health. Last week we had a membership service.

We welcomed Jamie into membership. It has been suggested by some people, sometimes our church membership service sounds rather like a set of rules.

I don't think it really does, but if it does sound like that, then we failed to get the point over, haven't we? Becoming a church member is not to jump through discipleship hoops.

It's to express openly and in practical ways that love that we had for one another. Just as in the marriage service we promised to do things, so in the membership service we promised to do things.

[24:17] How can we encourage one another if we're not actually meeting together? Barnabas, as I said, was always in the right place at the right time with his word of encouragement.

encouragement. How can we bring a word of comfort or even a word of rebuke from the scriptures if we're not familiar with them ourselves?

And perhaps above all, we promise to keep the church from worldliness. How can we keep the church from worldliness if we're worldly in our own lives and attitudes?

Perhaps in the 20th century, particularly, the church got into a bit of a mess over this. Worldliness started to be interpreted as, you know, worldliness is going to dances and drinking alcohol.

Worldliness is getting too involved in the business of this world. world. But the antidote to worldliness is not a set of do-nots.

[25:27] Actually, that just leads to a different sort of worldliness, to hypocrisy in the end. No, the antidote to worldliness is love expressed for one another in real and practical ways, just encouraging one another through daily life, when there are ups and downs, as we sung in that hymn just now, mourning with those who mourn and rejoicing with those who rejoice.

That's encouragement, that's practical help, and that's what Barnabas and Dorcas had in spays.

They had different skills and abilities, but they had a common purpose.

It was to encourage the church by a practical expression of love. We can't all be a Peter or Paul, for that matter, we can't all be a Barnabas or a Dorcas either.

We all have different personalities, different gifts, different ways of doing things. But if we are disciples, truly, disciples of Jesus, we can all share the same purpose.

We are all called to channel and make visible the love of Christ before a cynical watching world. We know what happens if you slip up.

[27:02] The world gathers like vultures. Some pastor is caught in some sin, and the media are all over it. Perhaps I have to be careful what I say here, but sometimes you feel that some of the things said by some of the Christian right in America is lacking in wisdom, perhaps.

We need to act in wisdom and encouragement. We are all called to channel and make visible the love of Christ before a cynical watching world.

When we get it right, that cynical world has no answer. John, of course, was the great apostle of love.

It's worth reading from 1 John 2 verses 5 to 11. If anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him.

This is how we know we are in him. Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. Note that phrase, must walk as Jesus did.

[28:20] Dear friends, I'm not writing you a new commandment, but an old one, which you heard since the beginning. Well, they had, of course. Jesus said it himself. This old commandment is the message you've heard.

Yet I am writing you a new command, he says, because it comes to you now as new. His truth is seen in him and you because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.

But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. He does not know where he's going because the darkness has blinded him. So before I stop, let me just give you a few final thoughts.

Barnabas and Dorcas are examples and role models for each of us. They may have lived long ago, but they provide role models for every one of us.

[29:44] Barnabas and Dorcas were as much doing the work of the Holy Spirit as were Saul and Peter. Nowadays we'd say they were empowered, wouldn't we?

That's a trendy word at the moment, empowerment. But actually empowerment is exactly what they were. They were empowered by the Holy Spirit. Barnabas's words were as much those of the Spirit as Saul's when he went out and debated.

we suggest in Acts that Barnabas was not a particularly good public speaker. But when he spoke in private in this way, he became the real word of encouragement.

And that enabled Saul to do his thing. He encouraged Saul to Paul to use his gifts of proclaiming the word and debating with those who opposed it.

God valued the work of Dorcas as well as the work of Peter. Certainly the believers in Joppa did when they found they were losing her.

[31:03] They almost went into panic mode. Quick, we must get Peter. That work was valued. She was valued by that church there. And Peter understood that and took notice.

and intervened and did what he could. When Dorcas sat with her sewing needle, perhaps chatting to her friends, the other widows, she was as much doing the work as Peter was when he said, Tabitha, get up.

As much doing the work of the spirit. it. So what should we make of this? Encouraging one another, there will be challenges and setbacks.

There always are. Things don't always go smoothly in this world. people. But what Barnabas and Dorcas, I would suggest to you, found, they found joy in this.

We were thinking about joy a few weeks ago. How is joy to be found in Christian service? Surely Barnabas and Dorcas understood where joy was to be found.

[32:19] it was to be found in encouraging each other because as they encouraged the brothers and sisters, so they were encouraged themselves.

They realized that God was truly at work through them. And as I say, they found joy in that. How can we find joy in the Christian life?

Surely it is by encouraging each other even more as we see the day approaching. So there's a whole lot more I could have said about this passage.

It's a long passage but I hope just looking at Barnabas and Dorcas has been a useful thing to do. I'm going to sing again now I think.

Christ from whom all blessings flow is a hymn about encouragement and encouraging one another. Amen. Thank you.