

Do you think the King...?

Acts 9.36-43 / Rev.7.9-17

‘They’re changing guards at Buckingham Palace. Christopher Robin went down with Alice.’ Let me make you groan with ‘we’re not quite sure what sort of disease Alice was, but Christopher Robin went down with it.’ No, he and Alice went down to Buck House. And a little later we gather he had a question: “‘Do you think the King knows all about me?’ Sure to, dear, but it’s time for tea,’ says Alice.” That came into my mind as I was thinking about the enormous contrast between our first and second readings – the story of an individual called Tabitha in Aramaic, Dorcas in Greek, or if we wanted to translate it ‘Gazelle’ in English. – and the story of ‘a great multitude that no-one could count’ singing praises to God.

It is sometimes a relief to me to recall, when I have a problem remembering someone’s name, that the psychologists say that at any given moment most of us could only name about 250 people we knew who were lined up in front of us. So it is quite a stretch of the imagination to believe that God knows us all by name. But that is a problem we create by imposing on God our human limitations – a mistake we are for ever making, one way or another. Because things are impossible for us, we find it difficult to believe they are possible for God.

Let’s just look at those stories for a moment or two. Why does Luke bother to tell us this tale of Tabitha, the Gazelle? It is a remarkable story – even the apostles were not famous for raising people from the dead. If it was always happening, I guess we would have more stories in the Acts of the Apostles to share that with us. But according to this story, it happened at least once. Why is that important, if people couldn’t expect it to happen all the time? For a start it was reminding everyone that when Jesus commissioned his friends to continue his work, to be his Body in the world, it was important to show that they were going to do the things he had done. And this is where Tabitha’s name matters. Do you remember that Jesus healed a little girl using a very similar word. It wasn’t her name, but when he spoke he said ‘Talitha kumi’ – meaning ‘Little Girl, get up.’ It is one of those rare times where Mark, who is the only one to tell the story, preserved the actual Aramaic words Jesus spoke, instead of translating it into Greek. Jesus says to her ‘Talitha kumi’, and we can assume that Peter would also be speaking Aramaic, and says to Dorcas ‘Tabitha kumi.’ There is another parallel with those two stories. Jesus also asks everyone to leave whilst he raises this little girl, and here also Peter ‘puts all of them outside’ before he prays for her. Here is a story which ties in the work of the church, through the

Apostles, with the work of Jesus. And that is what we need to grasp again during the Easter season – that although Jesus was risen, he was handing over his work to his followers, and empowering them in every way they needed to spread the message of God's love.

But look at how individual this is. Peter may have preached to thousands on the Day of Pentecost, but the real power of God is seen in the way his love touches individuals. Luke needn't have told us this woman's name – after all most of his readers were unlikely to know of her. But by naming her, he is saying something important about God's relationship with us. It echoes Jesus' words about there being joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. There is a children's hymn which has the verse:

There are hundreds of children, thousands, millions  
And yet their names are written on God's memory.  
There are hundreds and thousands, millions of children,  
But God knows everyone and God knows me.

As some of you know, I am addicted to Peanuts cartoons. There is a lovely sequence about a new kid who arrives in the neighbourhood. His parents are so angry that people are reduced to numbers that they have changed their surname to 95472. The boy is called 5 (actually short for 555) He has two sister called 3 and 4. But even that doesn't solve his problems of being known – he complains that his teacher keeps calling him 95472, when apparently the accent should be on the 4.

There is a truth in all that. We have just had elections – and when it comes to elections we risk becoming numbers – votes – not people. At national elections at least we become percentages and figures in swings, not people. One of the most profound messages of the Christian faith is that we are not just numbers, but individuals known and loved by God for what we are. That is the point of giving names at Baptism – they are the names in the book of life, as the Book of Revelation calls it.

And yet – and here we come to the second reading from Revelation – we are also part of that 'great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages.' We get things out of proportion if we privatise faith in a total way – again a risk we often run. Because it is true that God's love is for us all as individuals, we forget that because we are God's children by adoption and grace, we are also part of a huge family of brothers and sisters. And that means we have a restricted vision of the glory of God's love. You will have heard some version or other of that story of a person arriving in heaven and being shown around. He sees a very high wall, and can hear people the other side of it. He asks the angel who is behind the wall. And according to the joke-tellers prejudices the answer is 'that is the Catholics – (or the Protestants – or some other group) – because they like to think they are the only ones here.' We all tend to limit to extent of God's love, and we need to be reminded constantly that we do so. We also need the encouragement which comes from knowing we are part of a big group. At a time when people are constantly telling us that that less and less people go to church, it is good to be reminded that more people go to church than go to football matches. And when people counter that

with the fact that millions more watch football on TV – we can also reply that there are millions more who believe in God who don't go to church. But even in that picture of the hosts of heaven, there is still a reminder of our individual status. The elder tells John that the people wearing white are those who have come through the great ordeal. They are a crowd made up of important individuals.

There is another strand which connects our two stories. In the first one, we hear about people's grief being turned to joy when Tabitha is alive again, and in the vision of John he is told that these people he is looking at will have all their sorrows washed away – 'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' At the time when we are hopefully still filled with the joy of the Easter message, we are reminded that joy and the end of sorrows is the promise of the Gospel.

You probably know that story of the man walking along the seashore, picking up starfish and throwing them into the sea. Someone asks what he is doing, and he explains that they have been stranded by the tide, and will die unless they get back into the water. The questioner says – 'there are thousands of starfish – you can't throw them all back' But the man replies – 'I know, but I can at least help some.' There are no end of the things and people that we can and should pray about. We can't do it all – but at least we can help some – and trust that God who knows everyone by name, who sees each sparrow when it falls, as Jesus said, knows and cares equally for those we pray for, and those we don't.

'Do you think the King knows all about me?' – in a while we will come and kneel and receive personally our Lord in bread and wine. So the answer is 'Yes.' But we also say we do so 'with the whole Church throughout the world' and joining in 'the eternal song of heaven' – so we know also that the King knows all about everyone, and like the good shepherd, knows them all by name.

Later there are the Annual Parish Meetings. What we need to affirm is that every single one of the people on the Electoral Roll (and the handful of others who forgot to hand their forms in, and need to be added after today!) all have a part to play in being this part of the Body of Christ. We have so much to do together – but we only achieve it when every one of us is playing the part to which God has called us, one by one.