

The raising of Tabitha

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 11th May 2025 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Acts 9:32-43

Introduction: Natural or Supernatural?

What does the word “supernatural” mean to you? Do you believe in the supernatural? Is the supernatural part of your experience?

When we say we believe in God, we are acknowledging a being who is both the Creator of the natural world and is outside it, not limited by it. The Gospels describe Jesus' power to perform miracles – healings, power over nature, and even raising the dead to life. Jesus is God in human form, limited by his physical nature but also demonstrating a power that went beyond nature. Three words are used in the original Greek to describe his miracles, translated into English as “signs”, “wonders” and “deeds of power”.

The book of Acts describes what happened in the early Church following the resurrection of Jesus, and in this season of Easter the New Testament readings chosen by the lectionary illustrate how the supernatural power of God equipped the early Christians to share their faith and begin to spread the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection throughout the world. The descriptions of the early church in Jerusalem in the early chapters of Acts include references to miraculous healings by the apostles, carrying on the work of Jesus.

Last week we heard about the miraculous conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the fanatical persecutor of the church. A few years later Saul, who had started to use the Latin name Paul, was travelling the Mediterranean sharing the gospel and founding churches. One of the strongest arguments for the resurrection of Jesus is the fact that his followers believed it so strongly that they were willing to suffer and die for this message. Another piece of evidence is how that message spread, so that within a generation there were thriving churches throughout the Roman Empire – a consequence of the power of God which raised Jesus from the dead working in his followers.

The healing of Aeneas

Shortly after the book of Acts describes the conversion of Saul, we come to two miracles that Peter performs as he travels around Palestine encouraging the new church communities that have been started by the apostles and others. First, Peter meets a paralysed man called Aeneas in the town of Lydda. It doesn't say that Aeneas asked to be healed of his physical disability, just that Peter healed him – or, to be more precise, Jesus healed Aeneas through the words of Peter: "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." It's not that Peter has the ability to heal anyone himself; he is simply the channel for the supernatural power of God to break in to the natural condition of a sick man.

I mentioned earlier that three words were used for miracles in the original Greek: "signs", "wonders" and "deeds of power". Our English word "miracle" comes from the Latin

“miraculum” which simply means something amazing, something which inspires wonder. When God works in our lives, it is indeed a wonderful thing, a sign that he wishes to be active in our lives and, through us, in the world. We needn't limit our understanding of the supernatural to amazing healings that go beyond scientific explanation. When we believe that our natural world was created by a supernatural God, and that this God wishes to be involved in the lives of those he has created, the distinction between natural and supernatural becomes blurred.

The raising of Tabitha

We may assume that the news of the healing of Aeneas spread from the town of Lydda to the church in Joppa, some ten miles away on the coast. (You may remember that it was from Joppa that the prophet Jonah took a ship to escape from the Lord. It's now called Yafo or Jaffa - associated with oranges.)

One of the disciples of Jesus in Joppa was a lady called Tabitha, or Dorcas in its Greek equivalent, who was well known for her acts of charity. In that society, the loss of a husband meant the loss of financial security, and one of the ways Dorcas helped those in need was to make clothing for poor widows. No doubt Dorcas was a much respected member of the church in Joppa. And then, tragically, she got ill and died. We are not told what the leaders of the church expected to happen, but they immediately sent messengers asking Peter to come.

When Peter arrives and is shown into the room where Dorcas lies, he is confronted with an outpouring of intense

grief, with the widows Dorcas has helped weeping and showing the clothing she had made. What would you do if you were Peter?

We're not told what Peter was thinking, but it seems that he needed space to process what was going on, and bring the situation to the Lord in prayer. He asks everyone to leave the room, and then kneels down beside the body. I can imagine him thinking, "Lord, what am I to do? This wonderful servant of yours has passed away. The community is in shock. What is your will for me and for these people?"

I'm guessing that Peter spent some time on his knees, trying to tune in to God. And then he knew what he had to do:

He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.¹

The lesson for us

So what are we to learn from this story? I suppose that one important message that Luke, the writer of Acts, wants us to understand is that the signs and wonders he describes are evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Peter tells Aeneas "Jesus Christ heals you". This implies that Jesus is alive and active, working through his followers.

But I think there is also a message for us. The power of Jesus operates through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to all who believe and trust in Jesus Christ. The supernatural

¹ Acts 9:40-42 (NRSV)

power of God, the Creator of the universe and the one who raised Jesus from the dead, can work through his followers, which includes us. It's not about us, weak and inadequate as we are. It's all about God. What God is looking for is followers of Jesus who are willing to be channels for his love and supernatural power to touch others around us.

Peter saw the paralysed man and spoke a word of healing. He was faced with a scene of tragedy and grief and prayed about what he should do. Are we in tune with God and open to him leading us to speak a word, to say a prayer for someone, to act with compassion and practical care?

If we are, we should not limit our expectations of what God might do through us. The Christian faith is all about the supernatural breaking in to the natural, most obviously in Jesus but also in the obedience of his followers, both in the New Testament and today. Let us raise our sights, engage our faith and let God do wonderful and awesome things through us, to bring blessing and healing to the world.