

Our Legacy in Christ

We have all heard of the Nobel Peace Prize---awarded each year by a committee, who evaluate those who have been nominated with regard to how they have worked for peace. For 2019 there are 301 candidates, 223 are individuals and 78 are organizations. We will know who the winners are this year on 11th October, but we will not know who the other people and organisations are until 50 years from now.

As you know, the Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel, invented dynamite. It was an exciting discovery, and an incredibly important development for big engineering projects. Rather than a crew of men slogging away for days trying to chip their way through a mountain to build a railway tunnel, controlled dynamite blasts could be used to blow open a large tunnel in a very short time.

Nobel was horrified, then, when his discovery was used not just for peaceable purposes, but as the basis for building bombs used to kill hundreds and thousands of people.

It is said that Nobel decided to create his Peace Prize as a result of his death having been wrongly reported in the international newspapers. It was his brother who had died. But Nobel was said to have been shocked by the headline: The Merchant of Death is Dead.

It is interesting for all of us to think about what our own obituary or the headline of our own death might look like. Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, in our reading from Acts today (Acts 9.36-end) has that very strange experience of being present, alive, at the mourning for her own death. When Peter raises her from the dead she is surrounded by her fellow followers of Jesus—men and women---crying and grieving her passing. When Peter arrives, they make clear to him the good deeds that she has done in her life, the acts of charity she has performed, and they show him the evidence in the clothes that she has made.

Most of us, probably none of us, will have this experience which Alfred Nobel and Tabith had—we will not be present at our funeral wake in our earthly flesh. We will not wake up to know who was there, what they said, or how they felt.

And yet, our story raises for us the question of our own legacy. What is it that we leave behind when we die? This is not about money, or houses, or jewellery or other material riches, which a little careful thought in developing a will can take care of.

Rather, the question is---how will people remember us? And what effect have we had on the lives of others?

We know very little about Dorcas, but we do know something. Firstly, she was a widow, thus she had been married and she had suffered the loss of her husband. We hear nothing of her children or grandchildren being with her when she died. Perhaps she had remained childless, or her children were estranged or simply far away.

Yet, she had found and nurtured the later years of her life in a community of love and support amongst other widows and followers of Jesus. She had not spent her time merely enjoying herself or looking for light entertainment, but together with these other disciples of Jesus, she gave of her time and her talents in the service of others.

She is described as a disciple. This is not a term to be used lightly of someone. Traditionally, a disciple was a man—a student—someone who devoted himself to study with a great teacher.

And yet this devout and humble woman was counted as a disciple of Christ—a person who had devoted her life to learning from his life. What she had learned as a disciple of Jesus was how to love, how to care, how to give of her time, and importantly how to build up and be a part of this community of love and mutual care and concern.

It is interesting that in this short passage, the writer felt it necessary to tell us both names that this holy woman was known by—her Hebrew name—Tabitha—and her Greek name Dorcas.

It is a reminder to us, that those first Christians lived in a kind of ‘double culture’.

This may seem a strange thing, and yet, it is common to us all as Christians. For many of us, we live a double culture because we are living in Italy, but were not born here, it is not our native land, and Italian language and culture is something we have learned as we have lived here.

But beyond that, as Christians we are always living in a double culture. Jesus says, ‘My kingdom is not of this world,’ and our collect prayer today reminds us that we are to ‘seek those things which are above.’

This is not about escaping into some ‘otherworldliness’, but it is about recognising that what we pursue and look for as Christians, is the kingdom of God. We look to order our lives and to align our lives with the kingdom— and thus our earthly actions will reflect what we are seeking.

If we are seeking earthly gain: fame, popularity, power, money, status... the way we spend our time, our money, our talents will reflect that. And if we are seeking what is above, that is the values of the kingdom, so too, our lives will reflect that—people will see in us a willingness to be kind, to be helpful, to be generous to others, and mindful of those who are in need.

Alfred Nobel had to come to terms with the reality of what his invention brought to humanity. What he had created for ‘good’ had been used for ‘evil’—and that is probably true for all material things—we can use them for good or evil. He was moved to promote the good and wished to ‘fight back’ against that label: the merchant of death. Tabitha, a simple and devout woman, had the joy not only of being brought to life by Jesus, but the joy of knowing that her life and her simple works had made a difference to others.

Today we are challenged to think about our own legacy, not because we want to be famous or even have a legacy, but because it will help us to think about how we live our lives today.

Will it be clear to those around us and those who mourn our passing that we have sought in our lives to make visible the kingdom of God? Are we able, in some way, to use the confusions, the pain, and the struggles of our own lives in ways which show forth, nonetheless, the love of God, the healing of Christ, the joy and strength of the Holy Spirit? Can we allow Jesus to raise us up from the death of sin to the life of righteousness?

Amen.

A sermon preached by Revd Canon Vickie Sims, Sunday 12th May 2019; 10.30 am Eucharist, All Saints’ Milano