

'So, who is this Rhoda then? I've never heard of her.'

Cue for the director to drone on... 'She's a servant girl in the house of John Mark's mother, Mary. The family had quite a big house in Jerusalem. Quite possibly with the upper room where the last supper took place and the resurrection appearances and Pentecost.....'

Hmm I was decidedly not impressed. At the tender age of 15, I believed I had auditioned well for this play about the apostle Peter; I really wanted the part of one of the Marys. Would it matter if Mary Magdalene was only five foot? Immensely disappointed, I had to accept what I thought was a bit part in the drama. Rhoda, the servant girl.

Here's the background. Time: about 10 years after the resurrection. Place: Jerusalem. Herod Agrippa, King of the Jews, but not really a Jew himself, was trying to keep well in with both his Roman protectors and the Jewish elders. By having James, one of the first disciples, killed he managed to do both. Pleased with his success, Herod then arrested Simon Peter, one of the leaders of this new cult and threw him into prison under heavy guard. But Herod's timing was wrong. It was Passover. No executions until after the festival. Peter's friends met to pray together, for guidance and deliverance. Amazingly, in an escape scene worthy of a James Bond movie, Peter left prison in the middle of the night and returned to Mark's family home, where he stood banging on the door. Enter Rhoda, the servant-girl.

From Acts ch 12: 12-17 NRSV

Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. ¹³ When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, 'You are out of your mind!' But she insisted that it was so. They said, 'It is his angel.' ¹⁶ Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, 'Tell this to James and to the believers.'^[b] Then he left and went to another place. (*This James was the brother of Jesus.*)

Here in Luke's account of the challenges, tragedies of the first Christians is this superbly comic scene with Rhoda at the centre. She is so excited at hearing Peter's voice, she rushes to tell the group praying and forgets to open the door. Peter knocks louder. The group are rather patronising towards Rhoda. Poor dear girl you are mistaken. Peter's probably dead already and what you heard was his angel passing. More knocking. What irony! Here are a group praying earnestly for Peter's deliverance yet they fail to believe that God has already answered their prayer. Meanwhile the knocking gets louder and louder. Rhoda, realising her stupidity, dashes back to the door and lets Peter in. What noise, what relief, what joy! Peter has to shut them all up so that he can tell his story of how the Lord had brought him out of prison. Their prayers have been answered indeed.

I was disgruntled at 15 that I had been given what I saw as a minor role. It occurs to me now that this servant girl was named. I imagine she embraced the faith of Mark's household and was well known to Luke and other key players of the early church. In this incident she provides light relief, a down-to earth response in the middle of a remarkable episode. One of those accounts that bring the Bible to life. God deals with ordinary people in extraordinary ways. He loves and values each one of us, whatever our station in life. He knows each of us by name.

'See I have written your name on the palms of my hand' (Isaiah 49:16)

Over time, our roles in life change; our roles within the Christian community may change; due to circumstances, advancing age, covid restrictions. Bit part or not we are all servants ;

Jesus said to his disciples 'whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant...just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Matt 20: 26 – 28)

As servants of our loving God, we are charged with finding ways to support others in the work of the Kingdom. We need to seize the opportunity to open doors so that others may share in the good news.

I love Rhoda's excitement at hearing Peter's voice. I love her lack of propriety in interrupting the prayer meeting as she blurted out the news, that their prayers were answered. I love her exuberant persistence in the face of her so-called 'elders and betters.'

Where is our enthusiasm for the faith? How often do we overlook or try to explain away answered prayer? How rarely do we share this experience on a personal level ?

How ready are we to laugh at our own silliness and pigheadedness? To acknowledge that we all need some light relief from the difficulties life is throwing at us?

How willing are we to serve in whatever role is offered to us to the glory of God and the furtherance of his Kingdom of love?

Let us pray: Thank you Lord that you answer our prayers, that you fill our lives with so many blessings.

Forgive us Lord when we are blind and deaf to the many ways our prayers are answered.

Forgive us when we take ourselves too seriously, finding it hard to accept simple joys, ordinary tasks. In the power of the Holy Spirit, help us to begin again today.

Touch my life this morning with your loving-kindness, so that I can share this day with others in self-giving and service. In Jesus name Amen.

Hymn STF 611 Brother, sister, let me serve you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iq5kdohfUw>

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you,
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh, I'll laugh with you;
I will share you joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you,
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.

Richard A.M.Gillard