

I've heard your cry for help, and I'm here.

As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'

Luke 7:12-13

Every summer my parents would spend a week or two with us during the long school summer holidays. As they both got older and my mother became more infirm through a series of strokes and a fortnight in Cwmbran was the nearest they ever got to a holiday.

When they were in their seventies their only excursions were to keep hospital appointments and so when they were staying with us we used to try and take them out as much as possible. One day, during their last holiday with us, we decided that we would take them to Dyffryn Gardens.

As we set off the weather was beautiful. The sun shone in a clear blue sky and we thought we were set for a lovely afternoon. And then, the further we traveled down the M4 the cloudier it became and it began to rain, indeed, the heavens opened.

Now we were faced with having to make a decision. Should we go on in the hope that the weather would clear, or should we abandon the trip and go back home. The afternoon seemed to be literally a wash out, but turning round and going straight home seemed to be rather defeatist. And then, I suddenly hit upon another possibility.

Living in Pen Y Fai, just outside Bridgend, were some friends of my parents, Edith and Jim. My mother and Edith had worked together in the Dunlop factory in Liverpool during the war but Edith and Jim had moved away in the sixties when Jim, a pattern cutter in the shoe trade, had got a job in Bridgend.

This seemed to be the answer. We would put off Duffryn Gardens for another time, and call on Edith and Jim instead. Now Edith was one of those people who really deserved the title 'vivacious' –she was always full of life. I had no worries about us turning up out of the blue because nothing pleased Edith more than having people to fuss over. She seemed to be able to talk

without taking a breath and still produce tea and sandwiches and cakes, even before she'd taken your hat and coat.

We found the bungalow in Graham Avenue, and yes, their car was on the drive... so far so good. We formed a little group at the front door and I rang the bell. I was really looking forward to the door being opened, to the look of surprise, to the welcome. But it wasn't Edith or Jim who answered the door but Edith's sister, Rebecca. She looked pale and tired and I sensed that something was not right, but I carried on regardless. "Hello... I've got Mum and Dad with me... we were in our way to Dyffryn Gardens and it started to rain, so we thought we'd call and see Jim and Edith instead."

"Come in," she said, "It's lovely to see you... but Edith died in the early hours of this morning.

She'd had a stroke a few days earlier and that morning, had passed away. I'd like to think we were actually diverted to that little bungalow because perhaps we were able to provide some distraction, hopefully some comfort to the family, but who knows...

That all happened over fifteen years ago, but I was reminded of the events of that afternoon when I read the story of Jesus coming upon that funeral procession at the gateway at Nain.

This was a popular time in Jesus' Galilean ministry. He was engaged in an itinerant teaching ministry, going from town to town throughout the whole region declaring the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Originally he traveled alone. Then others began to come along, the twelve apostles whom he specially called, but others, too.

I'm sure there must have been a kind of carnival atmosphere. I have this image of Jesus leading

the way, except perhaps for an eager child or two running on ahead. Clustered around Jesus on the narrow road would be a few of his disciples deep in conversation with him, and a few from the crowd who couldn't get enough of his words. Strung about behind them for perhaps a quarter of a mile along the road were hundreds and hundreds of others, walking, following, expectant at what Jesus would do at the next stop.

And the next stop, the village of Nain, was where two processions met: the one a noisy jubilant crowd, the other a funeral procession, with all the ritualistic displays of grief and anguish. I imagine that as they confronted each other both groups fell silent.

Perhaps you can see why this story reminded me of my visit to Bridgend that summer afternoon. When I rang the doorbell our little party was in good spirits. I anticipated a warm welcome, I was pleased at the prospect of some old friends being able to catch up. Little did we know that on the other side of that door there was a similar sized group just beginning to come to terms with losing the person who had lit up their lives for as long as any of them could remember.

Of course, there were tears... but thank God I didn't say anything as crass as, 'Don't cry.' Yet that's just what Jesus said to the widow who was burying her only son. But it certainly wasn't a crass, unthinking response from Jesus... it was prompted by his compassion and the knowledge that he could intervene, miraculously.

In the Bible 'widow' is almost always synonymous with 'poverty'. In first century Palestine there was no form of social security, no widow's pension, no income support, means tested or otherwise. A woman without a husband or a son to support her faced an uncertain future.

Jesus is all too aware that this woman is not only dealing with bereavement, but also with the prospect of being destitute. And he takes pity on her.

To the onlookers, the disciples and the crowd following Jesus, and those in the funeral procession, it must have seemed utterly out of place for Jesus to tell the distraught woman 'not to cry', and then, to everyone's amazement, to do the unthinkable, to touch the bier. For the Jews death was unclean and to touch a corpse or

anything connected with a corpse was to make oneself unclean. I would imagine that what followed was one of those moments when no-one knew quite what to do. Some people were shocked, some are outraged, most were confused. What was going on? And then, while the funeral procession is at a standstill, Jesus spoke to the corpse: "Young man, I say to you, get up."

To the people at the time, the onlookers, the meaning was clear. Only Elijah and Elisha had been credited with raising the dead and so the immediate response was "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favourably upon his people."

With Easter still in our thoughts we too would say God has looked favourably upon his people but we know that Jesus is more than a just great prophet, he is indeed the Son of the Living God. Raising the widow's son was prompted by Jesus' compassion... the same compassion that led him to accept humiliation, torture and death on a wooden cross. When Jesus says 'Don't weep', he's not saying it as we might say it to soothe a frightened or unhappy child. He's not saying it as we might say it meaning, please don't cry... there's nothing I can do and your crying only emphasizes how helpless I am. Jesus is saying to the widow of Nain, I've heard your cry for help, and I'm here.

Jesus came into the world that we should have life, and have it to the full. He comes to us when we are at our lowest, whether it is through bereavement, family difficulties, career disappointments, when illness or just plain getting on in years means that it's harder or downright impossible to do so many of those things that we used to take for granted. But if only we will let him, Jesus comes to us as he came upon the widow at Nain. "Do not weep, I have heard your cry, and I am here."

Based on a sermon preached at Evensong on Easter 4 by Ken Jacob, Reader.