

Luke 7:11-17

How much more can I take?
How many more things could possibly happen to me?
Surely things can't get any worse?

How many times have we uttered those words?
How many times have we heard people we know say those words?

In the Gospel story today we find ourselves hearing about this poor woman in a desperate situation, a situation that seems to have no hope. After all we may expect to outlive our husbands or wives, but surely one of the most painful and emotionally distressing things to happen in our lives is to outlive our offspring? And yet that's just what has happened to this woman as she's **not** just outlived her one and only offspring, but her husband as well. In verse 12 we are told that 'the dead man was the **only** son of a woman who was a widow'. As far as she is concerned things can't get any worse, she has not only lost the two people she loved, she's also mourning the loss of the last member of the family line. And if that wasn't enough, her situation now leaves her without a male protector in a male-dominated world.

As far as she is concerned there is no hope. You could say that from the outside she appears alive, after all she is walking at the head of this funeral procession, yet inside she is dead. You can imagine, looking into her grief stricken face, looking into her eyes that no longer sparkled with life. For her the 'light of life' and the 'zest for life' had gone out.

When you think about it, it seems odd that in such an emotionally charged passage with such an important message this person is described as 'a woman', **she** is not given a name, but perhaps that's intentional because if she were to be given a name then perhaps our focus could be drawn to her rather than to the message that Luke is trying to put across?

So Luke places this unnamed woman firmly at the centre of this passage. She is also placed physically at the centre of the action, because she is about to be placed between two very different crowds that are on two very different journeys. There is this large crowd that is following her and probably weeping with her and for her in this funeral procession, and why not as they feel sorry for, share her grief, but don't know what they can do for her in her desperate and hopeless situation. When we are called to draw alongside someone who is in the depth of suffering or depth of grief, I'm sure you'll agree that it's difficult, it not sometimes impossible to think of suitable words to say, or simply answer the question, 'what can I do for this person?' And so this '**large crowd**' showing their support for '**this woman**' make their way to the gate of the town, more than likely moving along at a slow and steady pace, just as you would expect on such a sombre occasion. So that's all happening on the town side of the gate.

But on the other side, it's a very different story and a very different crowd. This large crowd couldn't be any different and in complete contrast to the one following this **'woman'** Luke is telling us about.

You can almost imagine a film directors shot, one of these great overhead shots, where we as the viewers can look down on the town wall with its gate. On the one side we've got this funeral procession moving ever closer to the gate and about to go through it, and then on the other side, out of sight of the funeral procession, we have this other large crowd moving along at a faster pace. They're much noisier, much more boisterous, not mournful but happy, not in a mood of commiseration but one of great celebration.

To find out why, we need to look back at what precedes the start point of our Gospel reading today, because the lectionary has done it's favourite trick and given us a passage which starts **'soon afterwards'**.

To get the context, to know where we are we need to look behind.

And what does come before our reading is a clear explanation and understanding of the mood of this other **'large crowd'**, this one that accompanied Jesus.

Put simply, they're all with Jesus and following Jesus because they've just witnessed this great act as Jesus heals a centurion's servant. This **'large crowd'** have every reason to celebrate.

And then it happens. The two crowds meet, face to face outside the town gates.

Picture the scene if you can, let your imagination run.

Going back to our film director, there would probably be some dramatic music as the two contrasting crowds unbeknown to each other come closer and closer until they meet just outside the gate.

The two crowds stop, probably harder for the crowd with Jesus at the pace they were moving at. But stop they did and this unnamed woman comes face to face with Jesus, her face saddened with the pain of grief and loss, her eyes red and sore with so much crying, because as far as she is concerned, there is no **hope** in her life.

We're not told all the finer details, was there a pause as Jesus fixes his eyes on this unnamed woman's eyes?

What we are told and do know are Jesus' feelings at the site of this grief stricken woman and her seemingly hopeless situation, in one translation we are told that **'his heart was filled with pity for her'** and in another translation **'his heart went out to her'**.

This is not the only time we hear these words about Jesus' feelings. If you take a look into John's Gospel and his account of the death of Lazarus, we are told (John 11:33) **'Jesus saw her weeping. And he saw how the people with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved'**.

Jesus' heart is filled with compassion.
It's one of the main themes of this passage.
As followers of Jesus, we need to have hearts full of compassion.

Jesus' words to this woman are to put it bluntly few, there's no great long speech from Jesus, just two words; 'don't cry'.

Once again there are things we are not told, for instance we don't know how this woman reacted, did she just stand there so numbed by the grief that occupied her life or did she react in some other way not reported by Luke?

One thing we do know is what happened next, and what did happen was quite remarkable.

Jesus simply goes over to this dead young man and commands him to 'get up'.

It's interesting to note that there has been no pleading from this unnamed woman to bring her son 'back to life', there's been no pleading from a member of this large crowd to heal this young man. Surprisingly there's not even been any comment from the crowd Jesus is with, after all as we have learned Jesus has just healed a centurion's servant, so you might expect someone to say something. Also there's no talk of faith healing this person, there is no great moment where Jesus looks up and offers a prayer to his Father.

There are just four key words, 'don't cry' as Jesus shows a heart of compassion to this unnamed woman and for the dead young man 'get up'.

And in that one command to this 'young man' Jesus has reversed the powers of darkness and death.

Jesus has just turned a funeral procession into a family reunion.

Jesus has turned what was a situation and a person with no hope into a person and situation full of hope!

I guess it would be tempting to leave it there, going back to our film director, they would have one of those long drawn out shots showing the crowds coming together with what must have been 'one heck of a party'.

End credits 'they lived happily ever after' and all that.

For us though, there is one thing we **don't** need to do and one thing we **do** need to do.

Firstly we don't need to spend time pondering on the reality of this passage, trying to answer the question about whether or not this 'young man' was brought back from the dead.

It's not always about factuality but about actuality.

In other words it's more important to address what we need to **do**, to see what this passage can show us and encourage us with.

This whole passage, as short as it is, is about the **hope** we have in Jesus as one who will deliver us from death and darkness.

Winston Churchill was once asked to address a gathering of students at Oxford University. Climbing up onto the podium, he removed his hat, put down his cane and removed his cigar.

Gazing at the assembled mass, he spoke the words 'never give up', he paused and after a while he repeated the same words 'never give up', in fact those were the only words of his speech.

And so he put his cigar back into his mouth, picked up his cane and put his hat back on. He left the podium to a standing ovation!

His words were few, but his message was clear.

Never give up hope.

Jesus' words were few, 'don't cry' and 'get up'.

In other words never give up hope.

In the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy one of the main characters says of hope 'hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.'

So when things do get too much for us, when we feel things can't possibly get any worse, when surly nothing else can go wrong, we need to remember this unnamed woman who had what appeared to be **no hope**, and then she comes face to face with Jesus and suddenly there is **hope**.

It's the kind of hope that if you think about the spelling of it, brings with it **Help**, **Opportunity** and the **Promise** of **Eternal** life.

And surly with sort of hope we must echo what is said in verse 17 of our reading, which says; 'This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country'.

We may not be in Judea, but we are in Hayfield, Buxworth or Chinley and there is a surrounding country.

Let's pray

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the hope we have in you.

We thank you for your heart of compassion.

Help us to have your heart of compassion in our lives?

We thank you that although there may be times of desperation and despair

There is also a time to hear your still small voice, saying 'don't cry' but hope in me.

Amen

Every Blessing

Peter Igo