

Stop. Look. Act.

Luke 7:11-17

I've driven across from Melbourne to Adelaide more times that I can remember. Those of you familiar with the journey will know that there are many "blink and you'll miss it" towns with quaint names like Pimpinio, Gerang Gerung and Lillimur. How of many of you can place the town Kiata? It's the home of the Little Desert Hotel, and the only reason I remember this is because on one trip I spent 15 minutes stopped in front of the hotel.



The police had closed the Western Highway to allow a funeral procession make its way to the Kiata cemetery.

Even the pub was closed that day as the community farewelled a loved one. It was impossible to feel frustration at this delay. I remembering wondering about the life of the person who was been taking to their last resting place.

At the conclusion of a funeral service at St Paul's, I'll lead the pallbearers in processing out of the church and down the pathway to Elland Ave. It's interesting to observe the reaction of passers-by. Some people stop walking as a sign of

respect. Others are clearly uncomfortable at the sight of a coffin and they lower their heads or walk more quickly.

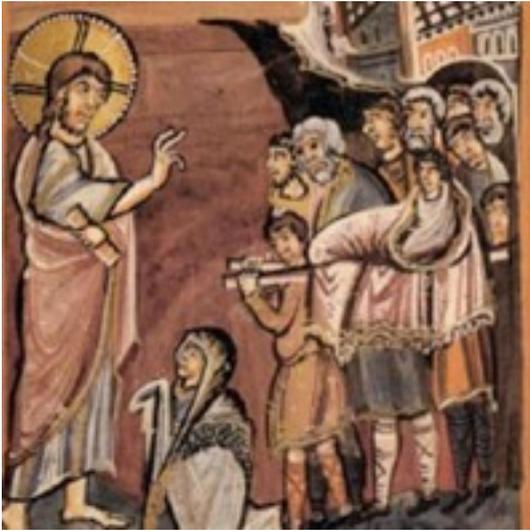
What do all those who pass by think of what they see? Do they consider it bad luck to see a hearse? Do they stop and think about the solidarity of death in which all human being share? Do they look into the faces of the mourners and see, indeed, feel, the grief which is written in them? Or do they just not think at all, caught up in the busyness of their own lives?



I know what Jesus did when he came across a funeral procession leaving the village of Nain. He stopped. He noticed. It was hard not to see the pain that the death of this young man had visited on his mother, not to mention the large crowd accompanying her with crying and wailing.

We know from Jesus' mission statement sermon in Luke 4 that God had anointed him "to proclaim good news to the poor...to proclaim freedom for the prisoners...to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." This drove everything Jesus said and did. And it meant that Jesus wasn't prepared to ignore the hard things, the difficult conversation, or people in need. Jesus was about his Father's business, and this was the way

that God had always acted. When God's people were being mistreated in Egypt, the book of Exodus tells us that "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them."



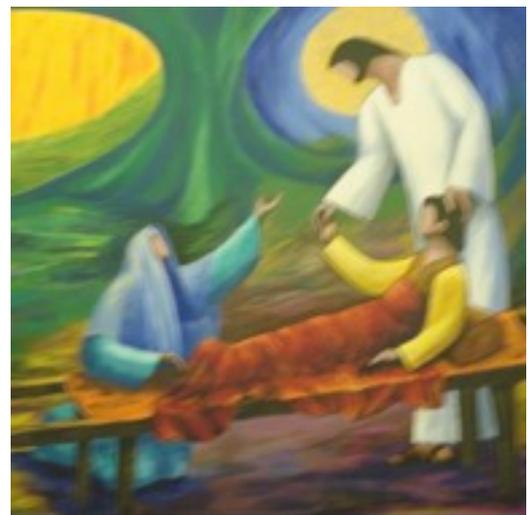
God looked. Jesus looked. God didn't turn away but he acted. Jesus didn't glance at the funeral procession and then move through it to something more important. This was the most important thing. Here was a widow, someone bereft of the support afforded by her husband, and reliant on her son. But he too was dead, and she faced a fearful future. Here was death doing its destructive work, bring chaos and disorder into lives about which God cared passionately.

"When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her." This was personally, deeply personal for Jesus. Death was the final enemy, the enemy Jesus was charged to bring down, and hence usher in the fullness of life that God had planned for all creation. Each death is a personal affront to God. For the grief it causes. For the

cessation of human relationships. For the deprivation and the devastation it brings.

"His heart went out to her." We are used to the image of the heart as the centre and source of our emotions. But the word used here refers to the bowels, the liver, the kidneys. Isn't this where we often feel stress and emotional pain? Jesus has compassion. But it's more than a feeling. It spills over into action, risky action. He tells the grieving mother, "Don't cry." It sounds as if Jesus is trying to shut down her sorrow, as we often do when we are uncomfortable with the grief of others. He then reaches out and touches the stretcher on which the lifeless body of her son is being carried. This, too, is risky. Jesus is making himself ritually unclean according to Jewish ceremonial law. "Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days."

But Jesus is willing to take this risk, because his mission is to bring life. Jesus' compassion causes him to cross that boundary for the sake of this young man and his mother. Then he does something so astounding and yet so simple. He speaks life: "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The word accomplishes what it says. "The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother." I'm always amazed at the lack of fuss and facade in all of Jesus' miracles, but especially in the raising of the



dead. He doesn't make a song and dance. He speaks or he prays to his Father, and immediately God's extraordinary power breaks into the ordinary, and normal transmission is restored. Do you wonder what that young man said to his mother?

"They were all filled with awe and praised God." Awe that was a mixture of fear and wonder. Holy fear at the man in front of them who possessed the power of God over life and death.

Wonder at the truly incredible thing that they had just witnessed. Perhaps a sense of unworthiness that they had been part of a life-changing, life-raising experience. Confidence that God had not abandoned them. "God has come to help his people." This is what Zechariah sings about in his song of praise to God for the birth of his son, John and for John's mission as the forerunner of the Messiah: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them." God has visited his people. God is not sequestered safely up in the sky. God has come down. God has seen. God has acted. We know the fullness of the story. Not just the death of this young man and his raising, but the death of another only son.



Jesus is journeying toward the cross. It's there his heavenly Father will become the grieving parent. He will watch his "one and only son" die. His heart will break as he sees Jesus take on all the world's pain and suffering. He will do all of this because of his love for all humanity. And he will raise Jesus to new life, life which God doesn't keep to himself but shares with all those who are baptised in his name, and who trust in his love to get them across the line from this life to the next.

The cross proves that God doesn't go missing when the going gets tough. God cannot, and will not, abandon those whom he loves. His heart drives him to "lift us out of the depths...and bring us up from the realm of the

dead...weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." When God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, he set the pattern for our lives. Death cannot have the last word. In Jesus, there is always hope because there is always life in him.

But the in-between times are not always easy. The American Christian writer Walt Wangerin puts it this way: "This is the paradox of our faith: joy is forged in sorrow. And death leads to life. And grief is the road between them." This grief is not always occasioned by the death of a loved one, but by much more ordinary circumstances: the "little deaths" with which we are confronted every day—a breakdown in relationship with a friend, a change in work-life or home with which we struggle, an accomplishment we had hoped to achieve but which we now realise will not happen, aches and pains and a growing sense of our mortality and we age.



God's help comes to us in the form of his word, which encourages us to keep the faith; in this holy gathering, through which we reorient ourselves to live

according to kingdom realities and not by what we see with our eyes, in the body and blood of his Son, Jesus Christ, in which we eat and drink kingdom life, and in the compassion of Christ which each member of his body is called to exercise. And because we know that God sees us, and stops, and acts, we are equipped to the same in the lives of others. We won't pass by the suffering of others, because the compassion of God calls us, too, to see, stop and act.



Keep your eyes open for ways in which God is calling to stop, to notice, and to act and speak with God's life-giving love. Never forget that this same God stops, notices, acts for you in love and grace always. Amen.

