

Luke 7:11-17 God takes the initiative.

Let me begin with a question this morning. What role does faith play in receiving answers to our prayers?

That question might bring to mind a number of stories and verses from Scripture. Stories such as the woman with the continual bleeding who secretly touched Jesus in the crowd and was healed, or the leper who came back to thank Jesus, because he was made whole, or the blind man who called out to Jesus from the crowd and was healed: in each case Jesus said to them, “your faith has healed you.”

We know that Jesus promised that if we ask in faith we will receive what we pray for. We may also recall the writer of Hebrews saying that without faith it is impossible to please God.

It seems faith plays an important part in receiving answers to our prayers. But is God’s working in our life always dependent upon our faith?

Last week, I had a conversation with a man who believes in Jesus, but who has also embraced a few ‘New Age’ concepts as well. He showed me a book he’d been reading called ‘Conversations with God’. He was very impressed with the author’s concept that if we pray, seeing in our minds eye the answer to our prayer already accomplished, we will always receive what we ask. It was very close to what Jesus taught, but it bothered me that it was all about how the power of visualisation and positive thinking could guarantee an answer to prayer. It was quite formulaic in its presentation.

I’m always uncomfortable with ‘formulas’ which seem to indicate that we can manipulate God and make him our servant.

As we read the Gospels, we see a simple truth lived out over and over again. Passage after passage shows Jesus taking the initiative; Jesus going to people trapped in desperate situations. Whether it’s a sinful woman at Jacob’s well; a blind man at the Temple; a poor beggar in Jericho; or a man possessed by demons; we are given the privilege of watching Jesus move in power in the lives of people trapped in hopeless and helpless situations.

These people didn’t follow a faith formula; they didn’t engage in an exercise of visualisation, or the power of positive thinking. Jesus simply came to them.

We read one such story today. It happened in a small hamlet called Nain.

Jesus and his disciples, with large crowd in tow were heading towards the town of Nain. As they approached, they met a sad procession coming the other way. V 12 says, **As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her.**

In this simple sentence, we catch a glimpse of the grief, hopelessness and despair that had encompassed this mother's life. For a start, she was a widow. Society wasn't equipped to deal with widows. There were no Vinnies or Sallies, no Centrelink; no government welfare agencies. A widow was on her own, and she did it tough. If her children were young, she was in dire straits; though if they were grown, she was a little better off. This widow only had one child – who'd grown to be a young man. He would have been looking after her; the love and light of her life, and her only means of support. Now, in his prime, he was dead. What grief this woman must have felt!

Added to her grief would have been a sense of hopelessness and despair. All her son's plans for the future were dust. What a waste of a young life. All his dreams – gone. And now what was she to do? Not only had she lost her only child, she now had no means of supporting herself. What would become of *her*? She would be totally dependent on the charity of her small community. How would she eat? How would she clothe herself? Her future would be bleak, hopeless. She joined the wailing women in an agony of spirit which knew no end.

As the two crowds met and began to mingle, Jesus would have seen the widow. It was customary for the widow to lead the procession, so she'd have been obvious. V. 13 says, **When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."**

The Greek word here that we translate 'heart' – and which is totally unpronounceable - means bowels, or guts. Jesus was moved to the very depths of his being with compassion for this woman. I believe he *felt* her grief and her hopelessness, and it tore him apart.

V 14 tells us, **Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still.**

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the coffin! That stopped *everyone* in their tracks. No one touched a coffin. It rendered the person ritually unclean! Here was some famous rabbi – one could tell from the size of the crowd – and he touched the coffin! The pallbearers stopped in their tracks and stood still, staring at him. The crowd hushed. The wailing stopped. The flutes petered out. Hundreds of eyes were

on Jesus. Then in the unnatural quiet and stillness, Jesus called out clearly... "Young man, I say to you, get up!"

Now, with this scene in your mind, just *listen* to this next verse.....The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

If you were in the crowd and saw these events unfolding before you – how would it affect you? Though the text doesn't say so, I'm sure at this point the pallbearers would have dropped the coffin! What would you think? Listen to how it affected the crowd:

They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

Through this amazing event, Jesus' status rose from being a Rabbi – a teacher, to “a great prophet” – someone in the same league as Isaiah or Jeremiah. It would have been a key event in the disciples' growing understanding of just who this person was that they were following. The statement “God has come to help his people” foreshadowed all that was to take place in Jerusalem through Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

Coming back to the widow, now. V 15 says...and Jesus gave him back to his mother. Such a short sentence, to describe such an earth shattering event!

The coffin would now be on the ground – one way or another - and Jesus would have helped the young man up, who himself must have been completely confused, and led him back to his mother. Imagine the mother's reaction! Now, instead of grief, there is wild, unstoppable joy!! She would have hugged and hugged her son, within an inch of his life! Instead of hopelessness and despair, now, there is hope and a future.

On a personal level, two things strike me about this story. One is that the widow didn't ask for anything. I doubt she even knew who Jesus was. **It was Jesus who took the initiative.** His focus was on the woman. He saw her need, and felt her pain. Without any request from the mother, Jesus **came to her.** He reached out in love and compassion, and turned her life around.

When we pray, I suspect that sometimes we feel we have to twist God's arm to answer us; that we have to convince him that we, or the people we pray for, really need his help. Sometimes we may even doubt his willingness to intervene in our lives.

And sometimes, when we pray, we might feel that we have so little faith, that there is no way God could possibly answer our prayer. But think for a minute – this widow exercised no faith at all!

What this story teaches us is that everything begins with God's love for us. **He comes to us.** He doesn't answer our prayers because we deserve it, or because we are super articulate, or spend hours in prayer, or because we have rock-solid faith. He comes to us because he *loves* us!

Jesus reminds us in Matthew 6:7, **when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.**

The second thing that strikes me about this story is how ready God is to do the impossible. Every time a sinner repents, and trusts in Jesus as saviour, God has raised the dead!

There is no situation in heaven or on earth that is beyond God's power to change or redeem. Do you remember the angel's words to Mary when he announced she was to become pregnant with the Messiah? He said, **"Nothing is impossible with God."**

Are we carrying any heavy burdens this morning? Is there a situation we face that looks hopeless? Are we praying for a loved one through a veil of grief and pain? Are we concerned that we may not have enough faith?

Then let's remember that God **comes to us.** He came to us when he invited us into his Kingdom, and we became his, and he continues to come to us in so many ways each day.

And let's remember that **nothing** is impossible to God. He can redeem, restore, renew and rejig the most impossible of situations!

May we be encouraged this morning to put our trust in him, who **will come to us** in our time of need.

Let's pray.