

Reading: Luke 7:11-17

To help celebrate my wife Rosemary's birthday recently, I thought I would make her a cake. There was quite a deal of pressure because our daughters reckon they can't remember dad ever making a cake. So I was out to impress. Carrot cake is my favourite, and also, because it's made with carrots, it's natural and good for you!

Rosemary was lovely about it but I have to say the cake was disappointing. It didn't really rise and it had no life. It was really more like a very thick biscuit. Later, I got to thinking. I think I left out an important ingredient. It was either the baking soda or the baking powder. It turns out that these single ingredients make the cake rise. They give it life. Even though they seem unimportant, they make all the difference. Jesus had this one ingredient - the one thing that made all the difference, the one thing that made the crowds want to follow him. This one thing was the focus of his ministry. It is repeated again and again in the Gospels. This ingredient goes by many names and we see it in action in today's Gospel reading. The magic ingredient is... mercy.

The disciples and a large crowd are following Jesus to a town called Nain. They only get as far as the gate and a funeral procession is going past. It's the funeral of a young man, the only son of widow. She is crying inconsolably. The death is bad enough, but Nain had no Department of Work and Income. The widow's son was her only source of income. She is emotional, and she is economically impoverished. Jesus sees her and he is moved with compassion. And this is the ingredient we are looking for - compassion. The Greek verb is much stronger than our word mercy. It has a gutsiness to it. We might say he was deeply stirred up. Sometimes it's translated pity or compassion. We might say love, but that's too passive. He is moved to do something. It's as if his entire being pours out love. The widow says nothing, but she doesn't need too. Jesus reached his hand out and touched the dead man. Jewish men were forbidden from touching dead people. It made them ritually unclean. But this is no matter to Jesus. He is moved with pity. Then a beautiful thing: having brought the son to life, Jesus gives him back to his mother. The relationship is restored and the woman's economic future is secured.

Luke uses this same verb at other times, like in the course of the Good Samaritan parable. The Good Samaritan has pity for the beaten man and attends to his need. Another occasion this word is used is in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The father has pity and runs to embrace his long lost son.

But what of us? Are we moved, like Jesus, with compassion to do something. Is mercy the secret ingredient that gives our actions life, or have we learned to dull mercy down? It's all too easy in our global village to become desensitized to others pain, and sometimes we can feel hopeless about the little we can do and whether it makes any difference at all.

Dr Robin Youngson has learnt the difference mercy makes. "I'm the anaesthetic specialist on call for epidural pain relief and emergency caesarean sections in the maternity unit of Auckland Hospital," says Dr Youngson. "I could not imagine a more privileged and joyful role. I didn't always see it that way. I work a 24hour shift. Childbirth is not an office hours business. Sometimes I'm called out several times in the night, exhausted and sleep deprived. In those circumstances it's only natural to feel somewhat grumpy and sorry for yourself. I used to carry my grumpiness into work with me and be intolerant of difficulties, delays or missing equipment. I wasn't always welcome in the labour room. Sometimes it felt like I was the enemy, intervening in childbirth when the plan was for a natural process with no drugs and no technology. It was an uphill struggle to make the preparations, to position the mother for the epidural injection and to communicate instructions. Occasionally the epidural wouldn't work well and I'd be called out of bed, yet again, filled with negative thoughts, tired and grumpy. One day I decided to choose a different attitude. I decided to choose compassion. I now take great care with the spirit and presence I bring into the room. I notice it reduces the mother's fear and distress. I ask after the midwife, enquiring if she has been busy or has had any rest. I do the epidural with the minimum of fuss and then witness the miracle of pain relief. It is a joyous experience. I don't care how tired I am. I go home with love and joy in my heart. Sometimes you have to change YOU to change the FIXING, HELPING OR SERVING? I choose to serve my patients on their own terms, to show compassion first."

In a cake you need that one magic ingredient. In life we need the one that Jesus had: mercy.

James K Baxter puts it like this:

My Love Came Through The City

My love came through the city
And they did not know him
With his beard and his eyes and his gentle hands
For he was a working man

My love stood on the lakeshore
And spoke to the people there
And the fish in the water forgot to swim
And the birds were quiet in the air.

'Truth' — he said, and — 'Love' — he said,
But his purest word was — 'Mercy' —
And the fishermen left their boats and came
To share his poverty.

My love was taken before the judge
And they nailed him on a tree
With his strong face and his long brown hair
And the whiteness of his body.

'Truth' — he said, and — 'Love' — he said,
But his purest word was — 'Mercy' —
And the blood ran down and the sun grew dark
For the lack of his company.

My love was only a working man
And now he is God on high;
I have left my books and my bed and my house,
To follow him till I die.

'Truth' — he said, and — 'Love' — he said,
But his purest word was — 'Mercy' —
Flowers and candles I bring to him
And no man is kinder than he.

James K Baxter
From Collected Poems
Oxford University press, 1979