

Coming across funerals unawares.

My dad's mum, Emily, died when he was just three. On the day of her funeral his Uncle Ernest took him for a walk in the park, to spare him such grief. As so often happens, the cunning plan totally failed: their walk directly coincided with the funeral cortege, the bier drawn by black stallions, the coffin festooned with wreaths, my dad's large family shrouded in black trailing behind. 'Oh look, Ernest, what pretty flowers,' my dear dad exclaimed. He always rejoiced over the beauty despite the dark. Coming across funerals unawares isn't always tragic. I was once burying someone at the very top of our churchyard, the grave dug right next to a high

wooden fence. The other side was the garden of a bungalow. The mourners and I marched quietly to the grave, no small talk when you're looking death in the face, the bearers lowered the coffin, the ropes silently slipping through their hands. But I could hear a terrier whimpering and scratching at the other side of the fence. 'Mandy, what are you doing digging up my flowerbed,' her owner shouted. I decided to crack on. 'Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live,' I intoned. 'What did you say, love?' Mandy's hard-of-hearing owner asked. 'And is full of misery, he cometh up and is cut down like a flower,' I continued, turning up the volume. 'Bloody hell!' my invisible hearer exclaimed, beating a hasty retreat into her bungalow, having taken the solemn funeral liturgy in a somewhat unexpected direction.

An unconventional funeral. I suppose all funerals are unconventional. I remember one, the church packed, a woman standing at the lectern, shaking at the front, giving a tribute to her friend the love of her life, who had died too soon. Inevitably she broke down, ‘I’m sorry, I’m a bit crap,’ she apologized. Not a word I had heard in the hallowed confines of Helmsley parish church before. But neither had I heard someone catch their feelings of terrible grief so succinctly and so honestly. She spoke for us all, so say all of us. ‘Thou art sleek and shining bright, but I am weary. Thy countenance is full of light but mine is dreary.’ Stevie Smith, *Little Boy Sick*. Being attentive to hurting points, the second mark of mission. In tonight’s reading from Luke 7:11-17 Jesus’ heart went out to that widow he chanced upon at Nain in

her utter grief. She had lost her only son. To survive a child is bad enough, but her son would have been the bread-winner, her old age pension and a dry roof over her head. She would be weeping twice, not only for him but also for the terrible destitution that awaited her. All those who mourn weep twice.

You get a hint of the level of destitution in the story of Ruth and Naomi in the Old Testament. Mother and daughter-in-law both widowed, Ruth the foreigner forced to glean for the scraps on the edge of the corn field. Boaz the landowner taking pity on her, instructing his men to leave a generous border of unharvested wheat and not molest her. #nother2 As if a widow was fair game, and being molested as she groveled for the scraps was the order of Israel's day. Like Boaz with the widow Ruth

Jesus, the son of David, the descendent of Boaz and Ruth has compassion on the widow of Nain.

The English translation fails to do the original Greek justice,

σπλαγχνιζομαι, *splangchnizomai*, literally gutted, onomatopoeic, since you wrench your guts saying it! Hardly any vowels, like Welsh! *σπλαψχον* are your inner vital organs

Jesus saw the widow's plight and was gutted. Gutted to perform a resurrection.

As Christ's disciples we are called to weep with those who weep, to be gutted by their plight. What makes you feel gutted? As an eleven year old boy I remember

feeling gutted for the children of Aberfan. There is usually a connection which drives the compassion. The children were a similar age to me. The first five years of my life were lived under the shadow of a spoil heap. Not to mention the fact that fifty years later I was to have the immense privilege of preaching at those children's memorial as Aberfan's bishop. No wonder I was gutted. There is always one moment in childhood when a door opens and lets the future in. The word crops up in six other places in the Gospels, and nowhere else. Three times in Matthew and Mark Matthew 14:14 Mark 6:34 Mark 8:2 where Jesus is σπλαγχνιζομαιεδ gutted by the crowd,

who have followed him for three days and run out of food, lost like sheep without a shepherd, and miraculously feeds them.

We are called to be gutted by the crowds, crowds of refugees, migrants, whatever, to pity them and feed them. Crowds of voters at referenda and elections, like sheep without a shepherd. Every church is called to be a food bank, offering food to those who will starve without, but supremely offering the bread of life, life in all its fullness.

The word crops up in two parables. Matthew 18:27 the parable of the two debtors, where the king is σπλαγχνιζομαιεδ gutted by the man in massive debt to him, who

throws himself at his feet, begging for mercy. Miraculously the king writes off a debt which runs into millions.

Ironically that debtor once forgiven goes away and guts some poor chap who merely owes him a quid. Forgive us as we forgive. Don't hoard forgiveness, let it flow. Are you a Sea of Galilee or a Dead Sea?

At one confirmation at Aberdare in the Welsh valleys I turned the church into a river, as you do: the River Jordan. The tower was Mount Hermon and the ringing captain gamely threw down a blue ball of wool, symbolising melt water forming the Jordan. I traced the Sea of Galilee, teaming with life, which the candidates knelt in to be confirmed, and hid the Dead Sea behind the altar with the surley servers God is

gutted for us and we bathe in his compassion. Do we let that compassion flow, like the sea of Galilee. Or do we hoard the compassion, don't let it go anywhere, or worse, rather than being gutted by people, gut them? Is this see of York a Sea of Galilee or a Dead Sea?

In Luke 15:20 the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father is σπλαγχνιζομαίεδ when he sees his wayward son, just a speck on the horizon, making his weary way home. The miracle there is that the father runs to meet his wayward son who'd blown half his capital. Why is that a miracle?

In those days wealth would be measured in girth, so the father would be a very obese to put it politely. Running would hardly be his thing. Yet he ran for love, belly and treble chins wobbling, necklace and belt jangling, face red with exertion, like Ed Balls climbing Kilimanjaro. ‘Look at that fool, running for love,’ his labourers would have sneered. Look at that fool on Golgotha, running for love, crucified for love.

Think of God, always on the look out for you when you are lost, moved to compassion at your return. Apparently those who have a child run away from home always leave a light on in the porch, 24/7, aching for a return. In John’s Gospel Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, and was met by light, the light of the world.

God's light always burns for his hurting children, battling with darkness. A bishop carries a crook as the sign of the Good Shepherd, always wanting to bring lost sheep home.

I know some here have lost a child and ache. For every parent here, their worst nightmare. As a father myself, but also as a bishop representing the Church throughout the ages and the world, I want to say I am so so sorry for you. Burn a light in your porch, just 12 p a night. Even if they will never return, that light still burns for them in your heart and their home. Speaking too of a greater light on a greater shore, to which all of us, God's children lost and found are one day bound.

The word crops up in one other healing, when Jesus is $\sigma\pi\lambda\alpha\gamma\chi\ni\zeta\omega\mu\alpha\iota\epsilon\delta$ gutted by the leper at the beginning of Mark's Gospel Mark 1:41. There is an interesting variant in this story, in that in Codex Bezae an ancient copy of the Gospels Jesus is ' $\sigma\pi\lambda\alpha\gamma\chi\ni\zeta\omega\mu\alpha\iota\epsilon\delta$ ' rather than $\sigma\pi\lambda\alpha\gamma\chi\ni\zeta\omega\mu\alpha\iota\epsilon\delta$, angry rather than gutted. Angry at what? At God? 'Why does it have to be like this, Lord? Let's reverse things for once.' Or angry at the separation that the disease brings?

I am very interested in the science of NT Textual Criticism. The problem is we don't have the original text of the Gospels, just copies of copies of copies of copies, the earliest from the Fourth Century. New Testament Textual Criticism sifts all the

textual variations for copying errors, or intentional or unintentional improvements to the text and tries to come up with the original. It's a real puzzler, the ultimate Sudoku.

It's impossible to call with those two. The NEB unwisely tries to combine both readings, describing Jesus looking at the leper with warm indignation: fury with a smile on its face! Whatever, Jesus being gutted results in the leprosy being banished, separation being banished. Almost as if Jesus is saying, 'We've got this wrong. Let's put it right.'

Lost crowds, lost sons, lost debtors, lost lepers, lost widows: a whole spectrum of misery which our Lord is $\sigma\pi\lambda\alpha\gamma\chi\ni\zeta\omega\mu\alpha\iota\delta$ by, gutted by, gutted to do something

massive. As Christ's followers we are called to be σπλαγχνιζομαιεδ genuinely gutted by them. Miracles begin with being gutted, by entering into the hurting points of God's wounded children. We are told that the Good Samaritan simply came to where the wounded Jew was, and as Christ, we go into the most terrible situations, simply to come to where his children are and show them pity. Cardinal Basil Hume – ‘A bishop is to come to where people are and take them to places they never dreamt of going.’

‘One cannot live quite without pity’ claimed Dostoevsky.

‘When you look at others, you could always begin to feel pity. When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination.’ To quote Graham Greene in *The Power and the Glory*, a marvelous book about the last priest being hounded out of Mexico’s atheistic state.

Former Archbishop of York, Cyril Garbett was bishop of Winchester in World War II when nearby Southampton was flattened by Luftwaffe bombs. The morning after the raid the night before he visited the scene, decked in his apron and gaiters. ‘What have the likes of you to do with the likes of us?’ a man jeered. Garbett crossed the rubble-strewn road and replied, ‘I know that this is so very little, but I do feel utterly

and tremendously sorry for you.' The man's tone and attitude changed. 'Thank you, sir. At the end of the day nothing else can be said.' Garbett σπλαγχνιζομαιεδ those sorry bomb victims. Came to where they were and was gutted for them.

Former Archbishop John Habgood's death set me thinking about his young cousin, William, who had excelled at Oxford and was teaching in the USA until his tragic death in an air crash in 1994. The death deeply affected John Habgood. I recall him breaking off from his script at a Confirmation in Bridlington Priory and just talking with tears in his eyes about William, that such deaths were 'intolerable, simply intolerable.' This was followed by a very long and quite awkward silence, during

which he looked with great intensity at a young mother in the front pew, who was due to be confirmed with her son. I always prepared notes on the candidates for the Archbishop, but was never quite sure he took much notice of my ramblings. I had noted that the young mother candidate had cancer with only weeks to live. The Archbishop's silent look combined such love and such sorrow it spoke mountains. He made a similar pause on a visit to Whitehaven. A Sri Lankan priest there had had major brain surgery, and hadn't got long. He was mute, in a wheelchair, with his dear wife tending him, looking so very sad. John Habgood commissioned him for a ministry of prayer, and then knelt down before him, almost in homage, held his hands in his and looked into his eyes, saying nothing. The silent before the silenced.

Back to Garbett. His driver, Len Payne, had been seconded to work in spitfire engineering, so Garbett, never having driven in his life before, drove his ancient car the ten miles from Winchester to Southampton, double declutch and all – probably posing more of a threat to Southampton's populace than the Luftwaffe!

His chaplain he had seconded to be a parish priest in Southampton's midst. The night of the bombing raid the chaplain carried his wife and their new born son into the vicarage cellar, and there baptised the baby, because he felt that none of them would survive the night. He then left them to visit his flock and help wherever he could. There is the supreme example of incarnation, coming to where people are and empathising with them, σπλαγχνιζομαιing with them, not a patronising, superior

pity, not polite pity, but gut-wrenching pity in the spirit of Christ. We may be rubbish at other things, but we can do the pity, we should do the pity. In Christ's name.

The Remembrance Sunday hymn, O valiant hearts is redeemed by a couple of lines:

'Still through the veil Christ the victor's pitying eyes look down to bless our lesser calvaries.' We are called to pity and bless and be gutted by the calvaries in our midst.

'The groaning of creation wrung out by pain and care, the anguish of a million hearts that break in dumb despair, O crucified Redeemer, these are thy cries of pain. A may they break our selfish hearts and love come in to reign.' A hymn by Timothy Rees,

Bishop of Llandaff a hymn that found me in my teenage years in far away Hull, as Christ finds us here, is gutted at our plight and calls us to be gutted for all his lost

children. That is the heart of Christianity, which the world and indeed the church so often misses. Poets like R S Thomas recall us: ‘This Christmas before an altar of gold, the holly will remind us how love bleeds.’ God loved the world so much that he impaled himself on it.

When you stand alongside those who are hurting, when you hurt with, are gutted for them, you are doing God’s work in Christ. It is not a distraction or interruption from the mission: don’t be bothering me with all your sorrows, I’ve got evangelism to do, a Gospel to proclaim. Being gutted **is** the mission, **is** evangelism, **is** the Gospel. The Gospel is full of interruptions, hurting people stopping Jesus in his tracks. He has compassion for the woman who has been bleeding for twelve years, who gets in his

way when he is on a 999 call to save a dying 12 year old girl. Inconvenient crosses stopping Jesus in his tracks, actually paving the way for Easter's dawn.

And the Eucharist marks all that. Focusing week by week, maybe even day by day on the body broken, the blood spilled, should enable the penny to drop, that he is there in every body broken, in every drop of spilled blood. Timothy Rees again: 'Wherever love is outraged, wherever hope is killed, where man still wrongs his brother man thy passion is fulfilled. We see they tortured body we see the wounds that bleed where sisterhood hangs crucified nailed to the cross of greed.' See every hurting child: See Christ!