

I recall a Lent Course at a parishioner's home where the prayers were so long and so boring that I made my own simple prayer, 'Lord, get me out of here!'

At that very moment the phone rang, a call for me my eldest daughter ringing from home. 'Dad, Dewi's died. Clare's so upset!' So without further ado I put the phone down and ran the length of the dark town, and arrived home breathless. There was Clare, holding Dewi in her cupped hands. Let me explain, Dewi rather than being the patron saint of Wales was her much loved pet hamster. Though her third hamster it was her first male, a thoroughly mischievous scamp who delighted us all.

Tonight he was delighting no one, because here we clearly had, in the parlance of Monty Python a dead hamster. I had encountered dead rodents before, eyes glazed over, air sacs collapsed, such a bedraggled sorry-looking fellow, his fur drenched and matted by my daughter's tears. As my daughter desperately tried to be brave in front of her dad, something snapped within me, and made me silently rail against heaven, 'I'm not having this!'

I took the hamster from her and cupped it in my own hands and went and stood over the central heating boiler, the warmest place in the house. As I cupped him in my warm hands, I stroked Dewi's fur, massaging his chest, blowing my own breath over his tiny head. I must have done this for about ten minutes. Clare looked at me with great hope. My two elder daughters looked at me with increasing pity. How embarrassing. Not only a dad who was a vicar, that was bad enough. But one who had clearly lost the plot and was so bad at bereavement that he couldn't even let a rodent go.

And then Dewi started breathing and I could detect the faintest of pulses rippling through his body. We wrapped him in warm cotton wool, put him in a box on top of the boiler and let him gently come round, come back to life. Job done I ran back to the housegroup where the prayers had by then mercifully ended. ‘Everything OK?’ folk asked. ‘Yeh,’ I replied. ‘I’ve just witnessed a resurrection!’ Now there’s a statement to bring a Lent Group to a grinding halt!

Why did I do it? Why did I risk making such a fool of myself, hoping against hope to bring a dead rodent back to life. Lots of reasons really. I felt sorry for my daughter Clare. A child’s grief breaks a parent’s heart. I was bored out of my mind by the Lent Group, and was fed up with Christian talk never resulting in Christian walk. As Sydney Carter quipped in his hymn, ‘We are Christian men and women, sir, always willing never able!’

But chiefly at the heart of my faith is Easter with the core belief that nothing, not even death, can put a stop to God, that everything every single thing is resurrectable. I guess I felt it was time to put that faith into action! Hence the miracle! I suppose given the resurrection, which is the biggest given of all times, then all other miracles are possible. As Saki quipped, ‘When once you have taken the impossible into your calculations, its possibilities become practically limitless.’

Other resurrections? My Uncle Edmund was a wonderful guy who spent his life’s ministry as an Evangelist in the Church Army, a very enthusiastic Evangelist, not shy like me. The thing is when he was 22 he died! In the late 1940s he had pneumonia was admitted to hospital, failed to respond to treatment and was pronounced dead. He remembered dying and going to a place of tremendous warmth and light, being surrounded by all his departed loved ones, including his

mother Emily who had died when he was five. He remembers meeting the Lord Jesus Christ who smiled at him and showed him the marks of the nails in his hands. Edmund remembers laughing that these marks were all that Christ had gained from his time on earth, the strangest of parting gifts. All this was accompanied by a wailing litany, 'Don't let him die, Lord, he has a work for you to do.' The Lord Jesus turned Edmund around and gently pushed him back to earth. Edmund awoke on the mortuary slab and sat up. It was the mortuary attendant who needed attention. Apparently his landlady had been sitting beside his bedside as he died, wailing, 'Don't let him die, Lord, he has a work for you to do.'

Edmund had kept quiet about this experience until the 1970s when he was ministering to a couple whose young daughter had died and were inconsolable in their grief. Edmund told them his story to assure them that Christ would not let their little one go, or any of us go, that a positive paradise with Christ lay beyond. We first heard about it when we were listening to Radio Four one Sunday morning in the 1970s. 'This morning we feature a CA officer who came back from the dead,' the announcer informed us. Me and my mum raised our eyebrows at each other. Yeh, right! Then we heard my Uncle Edmund's voice over the airwaves.

I mentioned last time about Jesus meeting with a leper at the beginning of Mark's Gospel. Most ancient manuscripts have Jesus pitying the leper, but a few have him being angry when the leper crosses his path. Almost as if Christ was outraged that this should be. That this wasn't what creation intended, that there was a plethora of wrong turnings which had ruined things. Leprosy was a catch all term for all skin diseases, including eczema and anything stress-related. Why the stress when God wants us to be whole? Leprosy also flags up a fractured community, with no go zones and untouchables and the whole industry of who was clean and who was not

clean. Those who are cast out by convention and social and religious order are cast in by Christ. Healing the leper is the miracle which advertises that, which bucks the trend, prefaced by Christ's anger. But you can't explain all disease away as stress related. You can't explain Christ's anger away as just a revulsion to society's revulsion to the ugly and unlovely. Disease and death, change and decay, the earthquake and the tsunami seem to be creation's very woof and warp. Even if you don't go for Genesis 3, the Fall, as an historic event, creation does have that fallen feel about it, wonderful though it is, it does also feel flawed. 'There once was a man, there was somert up with him,' was the way a Yorkshire lad started a short story, addressing the condition, catching the condition of us all. Christ's anger and subsequent miracle seem to be in the category of the manufacturer's apology for the high price that has to be paid for his product to function. Mine is the fault. Mine must be the cure! Another Lent Group I was leading became highly imaginative and speculated how God would fare on Watchdog, Manager of the Universe PLC, being grilled by Anne Robinson. 'Oh, she'd crucify him!' someone said.

The Gospels teem with miracles, and they don't all fall into the category of either righting implicit wrongs or reflecting the resurrection. The miracles being God-given will always bewilder us, because a God who can be understood is no God! We shouldn't generalise, each miracle should be looked at separately, checked for its message, its plausibility, although isn't that the definition of miracle, that which is implausible? But my two categories righting wrongs and mini-resurrections are good starters for ten, good tools to try and unpack the bewildering things that are going on. 'Good game, good game, hope you're playing it at home!' as that great Father of the Church Bruce Forsyth used to say.

Time forbids me to tackle all the miracles tonight. But take for example the feeding of the 5000,

180 gallons of water turned into wine at the Cana wedding, the miraculous catch of fish where the fishermen had previously toiled all night and caught nothing. BM (Before the Miracle): these were situations of deadness and despair. AM (After the Miracle): Resurrection, life in all its fullness, nets and baskets and stone jars brim-full of it.

Or BM: creation taking a wrong turning, starvation, thirst, endless toil with no reward. PM: Everyone is sated. Or take another example, the stilling of the storm on lake Galilee. Actually there are two miracles here. Miracle one stars someone who sleeps in the midst of the storm, in the midst of chaos, has the nerve not to thrash about making things worse, but to do nothing, be calm throughout. That is a miracle, the sure touch of one who knows that even the most chaotic storm is resurrectable.

And stilling the storm is maybe the Creator saying 'I so wished it could be different,' flagging up a kingdom where there will be no more dread seas, as well as no more gates to shut out or exclude people.

All the healing miracles fall into the category of mini-resurrections and restorations, filtered by a Christ for whom everything is resurrectable.

There is one healing miracle at the pool of Siloam in John's Gospel, the Lourdes of Palestine, where some guy has been on his stretcher there for 38 years, but has never quite made it into the healing waters. Talk about NHS waiting lists! Jesus looks him in the eyes and says, 'Do you want to be healed?' which is one of the best questions in the Gospel.

Like our Clare, the Bishop of London's daughter had her pet hamster die. She arranged a funeral, the coffin a silk-lined shoe box, a grave in the sunniest bit of the flower bed, an elaborate liturgy presided over by her Tudor-like father. As they gathered around the graveside the little hamster twitched in the shoe box, like Dewi coming out of a strange hibernation, threatening to spoil the elaborate funeral. 'Kill it, Daddy,' the little girl cried. Do you want a miracle? Of course we want a miracle, people would reply, but I wonder sometimes. I'm a bit of a fixer, a bit of a mender, driven I guess by an interest in engineering and a faith where everything is resurrectable.

More often than not, I wonder if people want things fixing, or whether they prefer things to remain the same, play the moaning game, play the nobody loves me, nobody-wants-to-make-me-better game, rather than be loved, be made better. We all probably prefer our warm, familiar, status-quo cocoon rather than break out into the cold unknown, little realising that one day our cocoon will become our tomb. We prefer the known, the familiar, the deadly, rather than risk life in all its frightening fullness. Or somehow, we've lost our nerve, done a deal with the world and argued resurrections out of existence in order to make our faith credible.

'They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.' Mark's conclusion to the women finding the tomb empty and being told by an angel that he is risen. The most amazing stuff ever. About which they say nothing, Rabbi Lionel Blue told the story of the man who fell off a cliff, but managed to catch hold of the branch of a tree growing out from the cliff side. He shouts to heaven in desperation, 'Is there anybody up there? Please help me.' Surprisingly, God replies. 'I am here, my son, here to care for you. Let go of the tree and I will carry you to safety in my everlasting arms.' A long silence 'Is there anybody else up there?!' We can't be doing with

resurrections. John's beautiful account of the first Easter Day, has those converting words of the Risen Jesus: 'Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said, "My Master.' Hear him saying your name as you weep. Do you turn? But we are told Mary clings to him, clings to the old Jesus, the old way of life. The old Jesus, at whose feet she sat by the hearth, enthralled. She wants to keep him like that, her pet Son-of-God rather than release him to be let loose throughout the world and throughout time.

And when faced with resurrections, I can see why we'd lose our nerve. Often in my own ministry I've felt bogus to the core. I've read the Gospel of Jesus making the blind see, I've read that Gospel to blind people, yet left them blind. I once read that Gospel in an old people's home in Middlesbrough, you can't get much worse than that. I was newly ordained, and hadn't really been trained for encountering old peoples' homes in Middlesbrough. In theory you are taking our Lord in his Blessed Sacrament to grateful people in the twilight of their lives. In practice, Matron shoves all her most difficult cases into the lounge, goes off for a ciggie break and leaves you to cope with the chaos.

Alzheimers had yet to be diagnosed, in those days you just accepted that old people were more than a bit confused. We had an old lady who thought she was a Red Indian and circled me during Mass making Red Indian sounds, as if I was a wagon train making incursions into her territory. I rather enjoyed her company. It was the other inmates who got to me, shouting at her to shut up. I guess it was God's way of preparing me for Diocesan and Provincial bishops' meetings. When I got to the punch line of my Gospel 'And the blind man received his sight,' one blind old lady, called Florrie, burst out 'Ee how lovely!' in genuine joy. Which was a bit of a miracle in itself, but not one worked by me.

Poor soul, for her life's work she had been the attendant at the Underground Ladies Loo in Central Middlesbrough. However bad your job, it couldn't be worse than that. Florrie was so devout, responded properly when I said 'The Lord be with you' when the other residents responded with other words. She received the consecrated bread as if it were the most precious thing in the world. Which it is. The other inmates didn't share my high Eucharistic view. One used to stash the bread in her handbag. I used to try and recover it. 'Nurse, he's stealing my stuff,' she wailed in complaint. Another used to drop it down her cleavage. 'You'll have to get out of that one yourself, Lord,' I used to think. I was a gibbering wreck by the end of every visit there. Saved by Florrie, my miracle.

And I feel most bogus when I visit a bereaved family I, an agent of the resurrection, a servant of the one who brought the dead back to life, yet I do not raise up their loved one. What a fraud! Almost as if I was a disciple of Alexander Fleming and said, 'Well yes, his antibiotic, his penicillin worked, but I'm sorry, mine doesn't, but let me spend all my ministry explaining why!

Yet just on the odd occasion I've detected what R S Thomas termed 'the movement of a curtain.' He wrote this poem about prayer, picturing it as a knight on a quest to rescue a princess imprisoned high in a tower, hesitant because he's not sure whether she's even up there at all. 'I would have refrained long since,' the knight admits, 'but that peering once through my locked fingers I thought I detected the movement of a curtain.'

Bishops have to write so much about themselves all that they have done, busy, busy, busy. I've

written reams, God forgive me. But if I actually wrote down those moments when I'd stopped doing, and simply allowed myself to be, and let God's grace shine through rather than block it with endless activity, then I would barely fill a side of A4. But what a side, what a side! Those very strange movements of a curtain moments. I remember years back our local GP tipped me off about a mother-to-be who had double pneumonia. Because she was six months pregnant they couldn't risk the strong antibiotics, or rather she wouldn't risk losing her babe. She wasn't expected to survive the night. I went round, it was about 10 pm. I remember the house, Prebendal House, an ancient house next door to the church. It was late at night, but I just walked in and startled the maid. But she relaxed when she saw my dog collar. 'I will take you to my mistress,' she said, in a broken Eastern European accent. Her mistress was on the bed, hair bedraggled, thrashing about, the eiderdown thrown off, the sheets drenched in sweat. She was obviously very heavily pregnant. I recall the doctor had mentioned the possibility of twins. Three lives at risk then. I didn't do much. Managed to get hold of her hand as she tossed and turned, prayed with her, for her and her unborn. I always like to pray with touch. Only a few minutes. Nothing more. I left her to the maid, who was sponging down her brow, whether her mistress wanted it all not.

The GP rang the next day. 'I can't believe this, but the fever broke, she's fine.' I didn't think anything of it, really. I was a busy parish priest, we had three young children, life goes on. It was only when I was conducting my 'movements of the curtain' exercise for my latest book that I recalled it, and realised it was more than a bit rum.

As the centurion was going down his servants met him and told him that his child was alive. He asked him at what hour he had begun to recover. 'Yesterday at one pm the fever left him.' The

self-same hour that Jesus had said 'Your son will live.' Jesus healing at a distance, a day's travel. Why can't he heal at a distance of 2000 years and 2000 miles? If only we could recover our nerve and expect the miracles and be the agent of them. Do you want to be healed? To repeat Saki, that great evangelist for resurrection 'When once you have taken the impossible into your calculations, its possibilities become practically limitless.'

Open that barred door, let Christ in and let his resurrection and all the miracles that proceed from it blow through your life and surprise you and your pet hamsters and all the hurting points where you yearn for transformation. 'He brought light out of darkness, not out of a lesser light. He can bring thy summer out of winter though thou have no spring.'