

Aim: To get people praying to God about the log jams they face

To record the words of the man raised from the dead in our Gospel story could have been one on the great journalistic coups of history! Isn't it amazing then that, when Jesus raises a dead man to life and the dead man begins to speak, we don't know what the man said! You'd have thought that would be one of the most prized speeches in the world! To have the experience of being raised from the dead: what wouldn't a tabloid newspaper pay for that! If only Max Clifford had lived 2000 years ago, rather than today!

But I suggest breaking the silence of death and bringing a young man back to life isn't the most significant feature of this gospel story. Returning a man to life seems here to be almost secondary to what Jesus does for the woman at the start and centre of the story.

What Jesus does is break an impasse; Jesus breaks a log jam that the woman he sees clearly faces. This unnamed woman's future was probably bleak. She is a widow: so her husband and principal protector in the community has died. Now her only son ... the one person in the world she might expect to be looked after by, has also died. As a widow without husband or children to look after her she is in an extremely vulnerable position. She will have to throw herself on the mercy of relatives and friends – all of whom may have so many existing commitments that they could not help her. Her future could be bleak, unloving and desperate. Having lost her son probably within 24 hours of the funeral, the widow of Nain would be understandably distraught and desperate about what will become of her.

But what happens as she and the mourners in her son's funeral procession leave the security of the town through a gate leading to the graveyard area is beyond all their expectation. On the far side of the town wall, as the woman faces a cold, 'brick wall' of a future, God in the person of Jesus approaches her. Jesus, we see, senses her distress. He feels deep, deep compassion as he sees her and seeks to attend to her needs. Suddenly the log jam she faced is opened up. Suddenly the impasse, the great unknown of how she would survive in the future, vanishes. Her son – the person on whom she was dependent for income and protection – through the power and work of God returns to life and returns to her. Out of the blue, she could breath again – and breath again freely.

As this person encounters Christ, an impasse is broken, a log jam is no more.

So: what log jams, I wonder, are we facing? In what ways are aspects of our futures clouded with doubt and uncertainty? What problems are you and I living with that we would love to have solved and sorted – but currently seem intractable, frustratingly difficult to move into a more positive position?

Are there situations like this in your family life? Or in your work life? Are there issues you have with an organisation or with friends that you would love to resolve and get into a better, more positive place?

I know there are for me – and not just one, but several. Some relate to family. Others relate to our life together here at St Peter's.

At St Peter's I'd love there, for instance, to be a youth worker so that all the great work that our young families parents do with our children in Young Seekers gets carried over, expanded and developed even further as the children grow into their secondary school years. It's really tough for parents to do youth work with their own children and the friends of their own children. What young people in that 11 – 16 age group benefit from more than anything is time and attention from people sensitive to their needs and interests who aren't their parents: ideally these will be adults aged 20 - 35 who can act both as good Christian role models and as developers and realisers of our young people's innate potential. So: the St Peter's Youth Work log jam. That's one impasse I'd love to see resolved – but at the moment I've no idea how it might happen or who might help make it happen.

Another situatio we are facing at St Peter's not currently easily resolved is how to face the IT challenges presented by this building. Our visiting preacher last week included in his sermon a powerful video that gave a very clear picture of

Embrace ME – Embrace the Middle East's - work in Palestine, Israel, Egypt and Syria. Fortunately the soundtrack was just clear and simple music. There was no voice-over to get lost in the large spaces of this building. Fortunately too, I and others at the front could see the words that faded in and out of pictures on the screen: but I bet some of those words and their messages were indecipherable to people at the back. St Peter's will really benefit from having better equipment to relay pictures, words and information more clearly to wherever people are sitting. I am delighted to report that progress is being made. We have grant funding of £15,000 to make this happen. PCC representatives, including myself, met with two sight and sound experts from other churches to review quotes and proposals made in recent months by four different companies. We know what the possibilities are – but the logjam is still in place: it's still not clear which IT solution will suit us best!

The heartening thing is that we have faced impasses and logjams before – and the impasses or logjams have been broken. Four years ago we had vision for two projects: one was our Hall refurbishment ambitions, called A Hall for All. The other was for the development back then, as now, for the development of our Youth Ministry. Each project had a major difficulty, an element of impasse, at its core. For the Hall for All project, the question was 'how on earth, just as the finance situation in the world was taking a huge downturn, were we going to raise the more than a quarter of a million pounds required to bring the project to completion?' And, for the Youth Ministry, it was clear that, though there were young people to work with, we just didn't seem to have the personal or financial resources to hand to make something happen.

But both logjams were broken. Firstly our wonderful Hall builder took a look at the architects plans and said 'Hang on! I could build you something bigger than what is planned for less money than the original plans require!' So the whole projects costs were cut substantially -and we got a bigger and better Meeting Room than originally proposed! Secondly, I got an email from a member of the congregation saying there was £4000 available from the City Council for youth work – if we can organise something in the next 6 weeks. So: we didn't hang about! We organised the Henleaze and Westbury Park Open Youth Work Project in those six weeks. It was a different kind of approach to developing youth ministry to what I was expecting – but it meant that what we needed - people and finance to work with young people in our area - suddenly became available. So we went for it!

In both the Hall refurbishment and the Youth ministry development, impasses were broken, logjams were cleared away. My memory of this is very clear. At the time we were holding Prayers for St Peter's services every month at 6.30 on a Sunday. We were sharing our our hopes and plans with God in prayer, asking for direction on ways to go and blessing if and as our hopes and plans accorded with God's will. In either the same or different months we shared our Hall and Youth hopes and difficulties with God – and then, one, two, or several months later – we were thanking God for the way impasses had been broken. Phil Heyward, the builder, was offering to refurbish the Hall and build the Meeting Room for well under £300,000 rather than well over it! And Liz and Phil Radford were galvanising friends at St Peter's and in the community to start a well financed youth group at North View Methodist Church's superb site and at the David Lloyd Leisure Centre. The logjams were cleared away!

It's easy to use the word 'godsend' as in 'that was a godsend' casually. But I am certainly prepared to describe the breaking of these impasses, the clearing of these logjams as 'godsend' i.e. sent by God. The provision of the resources needed to do our kingdom work came, in both cases, from surprising places. One was from our builder – who most people might expect would been keen to charge clients more rather than less money for work being done. The other was from the City Council – of all places – a group never known in recent times for support for or partnership with church groups. All I would say is that it's very interesting that when we prayed, these things happened.

In the terms of our Gospel story, there we were taking our concerns outside the walls of our personal prayer and conversation, expressing our hopes and difficulties openly and publicly – in the Prayers for St Peter's service and the information sheet which used to accompany it – and, it seems to me, God met us. God provided for us in unexpected ways, through unexpected people – just as the widow did as she and her friends took the body of her son outside the wall of the town of Nain and she encountered a surprising person, Jesus, an unknown healer daring to cross the bounds

of purity, touch the ritually unclean bier and bring her son back to life. An impasse broken: a logjam cleared.

So: the lesson for those of us facing impasses and logjams in our lives today is remarkably clear. 'Take them to God in prayer'. That's it. 'Take them to God in prayer – and keep taking them to God in prayer'. The response that comes back may not be what you expect. The sequence of events that follows may be puzzling or surprising. It might be that the response to what we are hoping for or asking is negative: i.e. 'no – what you are asking or hoping for does not accord with my will: my will is larger, more encompassing and possibly difficult or painful for you – but: trust me, I am with you'.

I regretted the disappearance of our Prayers for St Peter's services after holding them for 2 years: but there clearly wasn't an appetite among St Peter's people at that time to come out at 6.30pm on a Sunday evening for this purpose. Prayer for St Peter's continues in less formal and structured ways but at least a couple of challenges remain as we reflect on these things this morning.

The first is medium to long term. Of the 12 Ministries identified for the delivery of St Peter's Vision 'Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service', the Prayer Ministry is the least fleshed out. But finding ways for St Peter's people to develop their prayer practice individually and in groups is at the heart of this Ministry: and finding ways, for instance, to share in prayer for all the ministry the Holy Spirit is inviting us to get involved in at and through St Peter's, as we used to do in the monthly Prayers for St Peter's is, for me, a top priority. If you have any ideas to contribute to this, please let me know.

The second challenge is short term and immediate. God is in the business of clearing impasses and breaking logjams. How was the Christian community ever going to break out of the bounds of Jewish tradition and become the world-wide faith it is today? I know, says God, I'll send an ultra-Jew, a fanatic for the 'keep Judaism pure' cause – a Pharisee called Saul: he'll be a surprising but successful person in making Christianity world-wide. And that, by the way, is what our first reading was all about. How was a poor, defenceless widow ever going to experience the life God wanted for her again? I know, says God. I'll ensure that she encounters my son Jesus at her point of greatest need. It will be a surprising event in a surprising place – but the impasse will be broken, the logjam cleared. So: whatever – whatever – impasses and logjams we are facing – here at St Peter's or in our personal lives: keep taking them to God in prayer. And all the people said? 'Amen'.