

THE RAISING OF THE WIDOW'S SON AT NAIN

The kingdom, compassion, new creation and social dislocation

Luke 7.11-17

Introduction

From time to time I have had to stop services for many things. Someone falls ill and faints. Someone gets upset at something and causes a disturbance; a baby disgraces itself all over a god parent. I have had marriage services stopped because the young men decided to misbehave in a rowdy way or worse because the real time wife turned up to object.

But I have never had a funeral stopped. I have had many strange things happen at funerals but I have never had to stop a service. But that is what happens in today's little story.

The meeting

Nain is a small town a few (c8) kms south east of Nazareth. And Jesus is on his way there with his disciples and a bit of a crowd.

Imagine a warm day everyone in Jesus mob looking forward to a rest in Nain and a cold beer. Coming towards them is another crowd making racket enough to shake the local hills. The professional mourners and wailers are there, so that friends and relatives, and the grieving mother, doubly bereaved, can weep their hearts out without

being embarrassed. There are spice and/ or salt carriers; and probably the whole village has been picked up on the way. No private funeral here.

They are making their way from the family home through the streets to the town gate and on to the burial plot in a small cave in the side of a hill outside the town. The widow's husband was probably buried there not long ago and she has had to go back in recent times to fold his bones into a small bone-box so that the main shelf would be left free for her body. But instead she is burying her son on the shelf that was meant for her.

Our story really begins in the meeting of these two crowds.

The only son

No husband, and now her only son dead. This is a social and economic catastrophe for this woman. She would have no legal inheritance and would be dependent on charity. Notice how she is identified in relation to males; she is a widow (husband), and 'only son'. We do not know her name but we know where she fits in the pecking order. Being husbandless and sonless she is all but nothing.

We could describe her as in a position of dire vulnerability, without any visible means of support and deprived of her access to the larger community and any vestiges of social status with the village.

The compassionate traveler/benefactor

Death, social nothingness, grief and therefore chaos and disorder meet this other noisy crowd coming in the gate. And the leader of this group meets her not with pity or pious words but with compassion.

What is this enigmatic quality that is often spoken of today? Well first of all he puts the nameless woman at the centre of the universe as the recipient of the undivided attention of the bearer of God's creative word (see the centurion's servant). She has his whole attention.

Second his whole viscera are taken up with her plight. The ancient word (compassion) has gruesome meanings concerning animal's innards but in the Hebrew Bible it is linked with mercy, God's mercy. It is not a fleeting moment of feeling sorry. It is a sustained energy that takes over the whole inner life.

Thirdly, in its use in the Gospels that energy turns itself towards redeeming action.

And that is what happens here.

The woman is central. Jesus' focus and thus God's focus is on the widow. Notice how the story works. Everything is about her, not about magic or miracle or Jesus. Notice how often she is mentioned. Jesus raises the young man but he shows compassion on her. The

dead man is described as his *mother's only son*. In a culture where women found identity only in relation to males Luke gives identity to the man through his mother.

Jesus speaks to her and tells her not to weep. In 6.21 Jesus has told his listeners that the good news he is and brings will turn weeping into laughter. Compassion leads to the acting out of good news.

Then he touches the bier that they are carrying and stops the procession dead in its tracks. There is a good reason for that. Jesus has crossed a boundary again. Corpse impurity was to be avoided as far as possible. When you are dealing with the holiness of God you cannot be too careful. Obeying the rules means safety and security. Jesus redefines such security and safety in his person.

And one more thing, Jesus addresses the corpse. That may sound like a dumb idea on the face of it. However, the corpse sits up and speaks.

Aha remember the centurion's faith, "But only speak the word..." The God of Genesis 1 speaks the creative word again and new life is born. The good news is that Jesus bears this word and his whole compassionate energy focusses on giving new life to the son and the woman.

The Jesus gives the son to the mother. She who is husbandless and sonless and in mourning, she who epitomizes the 'poor' to whom

Jesus brings good news is the real recipient of Jesus' compassionate ministry.

The consequences

There are two levels of restoration and renewal in this story. The first is obvious: the young man is raised to life. This story has many elements of Jesus' story in it; the dying son, the rising again, Jesus and his mother at the cross. These are a foretaste of a greater victory that will become the good news. The rule of God is here and it is life affirming.

In this story life meets death and the life of God triumphs. At the city gate where all this takes place is a collision of life and death. We live in a world where some people thrive on making death. We think of war zones or ISIS of course, but think also world-wide poverty that condemns people to a short life and a quiet death; everyday violence in our cities and homes; think poor access to health services for many in our own country.

And let us be sure that this is not what the violent and death dealers bring. On Friday last I received a note from Fr. Shenouda Mansour of the NSW Ecumenical council and the Coptic Church.

On the 20th May 2016, the (a) 70 year old woman went through humiliation, where she was stripped naked and paraded on the street in a town in in Upper Egypt, El Minya. Using the woman's

own words about her experience, she said, "I was just as my mother gave birth to me and was screaming and crying."

This adds to the cry of the persecuted Christians in the Middle East. The many years of prejudice and discrimination and persecution of Christians in Egypt... has been for a very long time.

No good news there.

The good news is that the rule of God is life; the rule of the powers is death.

That is what the ancient villagers of Nain discerned when they gossiped, "God has looked favorably on his people." God has come near us to save and rescue us. This is the time we have been waiting. Good news indeed.

The good news is that God has come in Jesus as Lord of life.

But Jesus offers more than simply biological life. Remember that the main player in this story is the mother. This story is about the restoration of the woman to wholeness. In the raising of the son she is restored to her community.

We are social beings, persons-in-relation. Isolation is a form of punishment, cruelly driving some to madness. Jesus restores this woman's life in her society. She belongs, she is a person again. She

does not live in a perfect world, it is still male power dominated but it is what she has and even there her humanity can still flourish.

This is a story too about the God who visits in Jesus. Yes, the people spot the prophet. They could not miss it. After all, Elijah had worked a similar miracle in 1 Kings 17.8-24 at Zarephath.

But this is a prophet with a difference. This is a prophet whose vulnerability in compassion to this woman will send him to a cross. He lives compassionate vulnerability. There the forces of death and violence scooped him up. There they thought that they had him at last.

But they miscalculated. The same Spirit that raised the young man and gave the woman her life back raised Jesus. That is the Spirit at work in us.

As Paul was to say later, on that cross Jesus erased our record of sin and also,

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

He took the rag-tag band of death-dealers and displayed their true character. And he did it armed with the vulnerability of compassion in the Spirit.

Conclusion

This story will resonate with different levels of our lives. But critical to all meditation on it is that we live in and by this Jesus. We are not moral imitators but life-livers in His risen life in the Spirit. God calls us to live our vocations in the world in ways that pour forth the life of Jesus.

The way of death may seem attractive and powerful but it is run by a beaten rag-tag army the claims of which have been shown to be empty, baseless and destructive against the claims of cross-like, vulnerable compassion.

We live only in trust towards the risen Lord.