

ARE YOU ALIVE?

1 Kings 17. 17-24

Galatians 1. 11-24

Luke 7. 11-17

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

As our story opens, there is a funeral procession. We have the bier, which is the stretcher for the body. We have the bearers of the bier. We have the large crowd of accompanying mourners. We have the body being carried outside the city, because burials were prohibited within the city walls. But in this story, which includes only one dead body on the bier, there are actually two dead people. This is not just a funeral for a man, a ‘mother’s only son’. This is also a funeral for a mother and a widow.

On the day that her ‘only son’ died, the mother died. In accordance with the customs of the day, the bereaved mother walks in front of the bier. She leads the funeral procession toward the final resting place of death, the grave. This mother leads the procession to her son’s end, just as she led the way at his beginning, at his birth. She has to bury the one who came from her body and blood; and so when he dies, part of her dies as well. And she is not just a mother. She is also a widow.

As a widow with her ‘only son’ now dead, her predicament is dire. The death of her only son is a catastrophe because she is a widow. She will have no legal inheritance and will be dependent upon charity,¹ because her economic well-being was dependent on the men in her life. The woman’s whole world crumbles with the death of her ‘only son’. This is her funeral, too.

¹ Cf. Deut 26. 12, 27. 19; Ps 68. 5, 146. 9.

Our Lord was not a fan of funerals. He attends this funeral to stop it and to destroy death, to put an end to what the apostle Paul calls ‘the last enemy’.² Jesus does not want death to kill us, and he interrupts this funeral. Christ confronts death head on. He does not run in the opposite direction. We have before us a standoff with death at the city gate. Our Lord has his large following, but death does too. Jesus meets the widow first because she leads the death procession; and when he sees her, he is deeply moved. Death moves God (in Christ) to act; to do something.

It is interesting, and perhaps even shocking, that no-one asks our Lord to raise the widow’s son from the dead. There is no prayer request for resurrection. Unlike last week’s story about the centurion and his slave, there is no mention of faith at all in relation to the healing.³ It’s almost as if people had come to accept the fact of death, and all of its repercussions and implications. But Jesus takes the initiative because he cannot stand death in any form. He acts swiftly, with mercy and grace.

Christ acts, not only because he is kind, but because he has compassion. Compassion means literally ‘to suffer with’. He has the same compassion that the Good Samaritan had for the man who was robbed, stripped, beaten and left half-dead on the road.⁴ He has the same compassion that the father had for the prodigal son.⁵ Compassion for a person in need spurs one to action; and with Christ, compassion puts into action his power over death.

So our Lord touches the bier, violating Jewish purity laws.⁶ He takes the risk and breaks the religious rules for the life of another. He touches death and transforms it into life; because when he tells the young man to rise, ‘the dead man sat up and began to speak’. Jesus gives the man back to his mother. The widow does not say

² Cf. 1 Cor 15.

³ Of the twenty-two healings recorded in St Luke’s gospel, the role of faith is mentioned in only five of them.

⁴ Cf. Lk 10. 33.

⁵ Cf. Lk 15. 20.

⁶ Cf. Num 19. 11, 16.

a word. She never says ‘alleluia’ or ‘thank you Lord’ or ‘praise God’. But it does not matter. Jesus knows what she needs.

The death that the widow experienced because of her son’s death was now demolished. In giving the mother’s ‘only son’ back to her, Christ not only gave her back economic security and stability; he gave her back her life. By raising the son, he also ‘resurrected’ the mother. Her dead hopes are made alive again. Her dreams for the future are restored. What she had lost, she has now re-found. The funeral for two dead people is now over. All it took was one touch from our Lord to do it.

When the crowd saw this miracle, they glorified God saying, ‘A great prophet has risen among us!’. Indeed, Jesus has shown that he is the prophet who fulfils the work of the great prophets of Israel, including Elijah, whose miracle of resuscitation is recorded in our Old Testament lesson. St Luke’s gospel (and the whole of Scripture in fact) will reveal that Christ is greater than both the prophets and John the Baptist. His power to raise to new life is evidence of his divine identity.

Last Thursday, someone came to see me in my study and told me that she was dissatisfied with the superficiality of her life. She saw this dissatisfaction as a good thing, even something that God had put in her heart. She said that she now wants to live life more fully; more deeply; and more meaningfully. And she believes that God will provide that depth and meaning. She is hungry for it.

That woman’s visit prompted me to think. Are you and I *alive*? Yes, of course, we are living and breathing; but how *alive* are we spiritually? How much of our life is rooted in God?

God wants to give us back our *lives*. Just when we might have thought that our days of truly living are over, our Lord stands before us, ready to make one more

compassionate move. He stands there, ready to say one more loving word, which is 'rise!' He stands there, ready to resuscitate hopes that we thought were dead; ready to restore relationships that we thought were eternally severed; ready to set situations right that we thought would never work. Yes, Jesus can bring these things back. He can restore our *lives* to us, while we are still 'living'.

This same Jesus, God's 'only son', will (as we know) die himself and leave his own mother. And he was resurrected and rose again so that we – you and I – might live again; not only in the future life, but also in the present one. Just as he calls the widow's son in the village of Nain to 'rise', so he calls us to 'rise' today. To truly live.

Are we alive? I know that we are here in body. But are we truly alive?

Howard Thurman once said, 'Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.'

Amen.