

Sunday 6 June: First Sunday after Trinity

The Meaning in the Miracle

Readings: Galatians 1.11-end; Luke 7.11-17

I read today's Gospel earlier in the week – the story of the way Jesus raises the widow's son at Nain. It is a story only found in Luke, and to be honest, it is a story which seems not only hard to believe but also confusing to apply. I read this story from the Gospel in a week in which all of us have been confronted by lives brutally and seemingly randomly destroyed, not restored. There has been endless coverage of the tragedy in Cumbria, and all those finding it so hard to comprehend the enormity of the murders which have taken place, which have ended forever the seeming order and tranquility of their lives. We are told that they are dazed, stunned, unable to believe the reality of what has happened in their midst. Then there is the death of the Turkish activists repeatedly shot at close range in the convoy bringing relief supplies to the Gaza. In all these deaths there is that human desire to rewind to go back and change what has happened. 'If only... if only he had not been on his bicycle at that time, if only he had not decided to go to work on that day, if only it was just some terrible mistake and they were not dead after all...if only they had...' And yet death is not rewind-able. Death is death, and the horror and the grief of it is its permanence. There is no going back. It is not pretend. Death it is forever. Have not all of us who faced grief at some stage in our lives prayed and prayed that it might be otherwise? 'Please God let this death not be true, please God help them, heal them, take this illness away, bring them back, make them love me, give me another chance... Please God make it not be true.' And yet seemingly the prayer is not heard. Time does not return; the loss is irreversible.

Jesus' raising of the widow's son stands in complete and confusing contrast to this reality. Jesus sees that the widow's only son has died. Jesus stops the event in the midst of the grief and reverses it: "'Young man I say to you rise' and the dead man sat up and began to speak." How can we understand this miracle? No one comes back to life in the middle of a funeral except in fiction. And if Jesus really did raise this dead young man the questions are still not answered. Why then did he die in the first place? Why this man and not others? Why is this miracle so random and so against the laws of nature? And the questioning does not stop there... Why if Jesus has the power to save the widow's son did he not save my son or loved one, or husband or wife or father or mother, or cure me when I prayed to him?

I am not sure any of us can answer those questions; we have to live them. When I was a young boy there was a friend of our family called Anne. She used to come and visit us and have holidays with us and as children we loved her. I remember her a bit like Mary Poppins. She seemed to bring fun and laughter and we liked it when she looked after us when our parents went away. When she was in her 30s, my Mum and Dad told me that she had very bad cancer and that they had decided she would come and live with us so we could look after her. At first, looking after her seemed fun and loving but as she became more ill and thinner, and her pain increased and I heard her crying and then screaming out at night it did not seem fun at all but really frightening. I remember as a child praying and praying that she would get better but when she did not but seemed in so much pain I remember my prayer changing, and praying that she would die peacefully. You see, I could no longer imagine her getting better. She seemed trapped by her illness, as though her Spirit was longing to be free of the body which was causing her so much pain. I remember being both sad and glad when she died. In our parish at that time we had a rather evangelical prayer group. They used to come round and pray for Anne. After Anne died a woman from this group told my mother something must have been wrong – they felt their prayers had failed. And I remember overhearing my

mother saying she was very cross with them: “I don’t know how they can say prayer failed. If they truly knew and loved Anne they would know that prayer was answered”, my mother said. I wasn’t quite sure about the logic of this but I did know secretly that I had prayed for Anne to depart in peace. In my imagination, more than that, in my heart, she had been somehow raised up. The thought that struck me then and many times since then is that both life and death can be an answer to prayer, because both life and death in God’s hands are life. I was to think more about this many years later when people I loved were killed tragically. Although they were dead I did not, and do not, believe that my prayer that they might live, had gone unanswered; although they were dead, yet they lived. I experienced and still experience quite profoundly that they have been raised up.

St Augustine used to complain that when we interpret the Gospels we get stuck on the “wonder” element, the magically miraculous event. We spend our time speculating whether such an event could have possibly occurred and in so doing miss the kernel of the miracle, for the shell. By hoping for a magic moment, we often miss Christ’s presence here and now. Miracles do not tell us about the science of the miracle, they tell us about the nature of God. We need to stand back from the miracle and see the before and the beyond of the event – realise the bigger picture, the shape of the Gospel, which is both now and forever.

To return to our Gospel passage with this thought in mind, we see the raising of the widow’s son at Nain not as an isolated and incongruous incident, but very much part of the whole narrative to which Luke’s Gospel is bearing witness. Though this narrative is given an actual time and context, it is not confined or limited by that context. This is a Gospel for all people and all times; a prophetic Gospel which traces the ancestry of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, right back to the first Adam, and right forward into the Acts of the Apostles, who will continue the story of the Gospels and confirm this Gospel as the Spirit continues its work. The history Luke is writing, is the one he has experienced as salvation history. He sees God’s action in Jesus Christ as the great central intervention of God into human affairs – the miracles of Christ point to Christ’s own resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit.

In Luke Chapter 4 Jesus in the synagogue announces his ‘mission action plan’:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has sent me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.

Now Jesus sets out to reveal that spirit of liberation and hope. He teaches, he touches, he confronts, he heals. It is a kingdom which turns things upside down; a great reversal of order which announces a new and radical inclusiveness. In Chapter Seven, immediately preceding our Gospel for today, Jesus heals a Centurion’s servant. This is a radical break with convention and tradition. Not only is the Spirit of God’s healing power extended to a Gentile, but to a Roman Centurion, a member of the occupying force. And this all because of an equally disorientating and re-orientating love this centurion has for his own servant. Who would go to such lengths for a servant?

Luke now shows us that this Spirit reaches out even beyond death. It is now that Jesus raises the widow’s son. Jesus sees the grief of the widow, he sees her story and he has compassion for her. The death of her son leaves her destitute: now she has no husband and no son to provide for her and her inheritance is gone. It is here among the forsaken that the kingdom begins. “Young man I say to you rise”, and beyond that young man all are included. ‘Rise

up, the life in Christ is greater than death. Rise, all who are covered by life, rise all who feel weighed down by tragedy and grief. Rise, all who fear the darkness and long for the light, rise all who feel they have failed and want to be free. Rise, all you who feel you are discriminated against and live without belonging, for you will be found by his love, rise all who fear death, you will live in God's Spirit. Rise, Christ's Spirit is his gift to you.' This is the compassion and the life of God in which we share.

Now we see the movement of Luke's Gospel, for the very next scene shows John the Baptist's disciples coming from the imprisoned John the Baptist asking the question I asked at the beginning of this address: 'Is this really true?' "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" You can understand John's disillusionment and doubt. He is in prison facing death. Doubt has set in. Can Jesus bring salvation to our present reality or is this man just a fantasy and a delusion? Jesus said to these servants of John "Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard; the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

What we are seeing in the movement of this Gospel is an incredible reversal of the human order. Luke reveals to us a new inclusive life and love which is being open to the crippled, the blind, the leper, the lame, the lost, the widow, the grieving, the Gentile, the servant, the slave, the outcast, both men and women, even the thief on the cross... ALL can be raised up.

What Luke's Gospel and then Acts reveal, is the universality of God's grace – there is an incredible openness in Christ's call. This history is now, being played out on a universal stage. This call to discipleship is not a narrow holiness cult, it is a call into community with others. This is Gospel and the one who raises up continually turns to us his audience and says "Now go and do the same."

"I say to you rise."