

2nd Sunday before Lent 2025: Healing Series: The Widow of Nain Luke 7. 11-17

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is the second in a series of sermons from Luke Chapter 7 as we prepare for the ministry of healing at our 10am service next Sunday. Those who were here last week will recall Linda's words as Jesus, by the power of his word, healed the servant of a high-ranking Roman Centurion at Capernaum.

Jesus now continues his itinerant ministry in Galilee and approaches a town called Nain, about 25 miles south of Capernaum. I have visited Nain – a poor Palestinian Christian village with a church building that had seen better days. I remember the group of smiling children coming to meet us as we alighted from the coach – they were hoping for a shekel or two as some pocket money. We obliged. And they were thrilled to show us their church and that their village was in the Gospel.

Luke tells us that Jesus arrived with his disciples *and* a large crowd. For Jesus was indeed an object of curiosity. Some were following him as their Teacher; others perhaps were simply tagging along doubtless wanting to see something spectacular. Luke is asking us – are we disciples or simply on-lookers?

So, we can think of a kind of procession approaching Nain, Jesus leading his followers to the next town. But this procession then meets another but very different procession – another large crowd, but this one was a funeral procession making its slow and sad journey out of the town to the place of burial. A man has died, but the focus is not so much on him but on his poor mother, for this man was her only son, and she was a widow. This is such a contrast to last week – there, it was a Centurion, a man of status, who was very wealthy and highly regarded. But now we meet someone who is destitute. This death was a double catastrophe. To lose a son, an only son, is bitter in the extreme, but with her son's death went also the means to live, as he would have been the bread-winner. This is why the Old Testament constantly reminds God's people to care for the widow and the orphan – because they were entirely dependent on the community for the necessities of life. So, we have a scenario where a procession of life, led by Jesus, meets a procession of death, led by the bier. What happens when life meets death?

Now there is a little detail in Luke's narrative that we might miss. Luke says, 'When *the Lord* saw her'. This is first time in the Gospel that Jesus is called 'the Lord'. And this is so significant. The word 'Lord' was and is used by Jewish people to designate God. The name that God first revealed to Moses – 'I am who I am' was rendered as

four consonants in Hebrew, the equivalent of YHWH in English, often rendered as *Yahweh*. But for Jews, the name is both unpronounceable and too holy for any human to utter. So, in the Synagogue, the Jewish rabbis substituted *Adonai* or *Lord* in its place. So, Luke is using the divine name for Jesus. More about that in a moment.

And it's moving to hear that when the Lord saw the widow in the agony of her grief, he had *compassion* for her. Compassion is far more than mere sympathy or pity. We can have sympathy for someone but it doesn't always touch our inner selves. Compassion is a gut feeling that requires a response. Jesus' heart reached out to her. He got himself into her shoes. And he said to her – 'Do not weep'. Now Jesus said this because he knew what he was about to do. There is no question that he was rebuking the mother for grieving. Grieving is the proper human response to loss. Remember, Jesus himself wept at the grave of Lazarus. But here, the command to stop weeping is to announce that something earth-shattering was about to happen that would banish tears. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the bier. And Luke says, 'everyone stopped' – you can sense the tension. And he cried out – 'Young man, arise'. And the young man sat up and began to speak. And I can imagine Jesus helping him down from the bier, embracing him. And there's another touching moment – we are told that Jesus gave the young man back to his mother. If there were tears, they are now tears of joy. And this remarkable sign brought forth both fear and praise, as the crowds testified that a great Prophet had arisen and that God had visited his people. And of course, there are parallels with today's first reading – when Elijah revives the son of a widow, although many see in that story the first reference to mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. But in Luke's story, there is no question that the son is dead. Yes, the crowds respond by saying a great Prophet like Elijah has arisen among us. Luke would say, a *greater* than Elijah has risen among us. One who is 'the Lord', God among us.

What has this story to do with the healing ministry and next Sunday's service? Well, in many ways it goes back to the fact that Luke uses the title 'The Lord'. In Jesus' ministry we see God's Kingdom present on earth. And what happens when God reigns on earth? Well. Well, the result is life and joy and peace. People are healed, the poor hear good news, those who are disturbed by adverse powers have peace of mind restored to them. Even the dead are raised. And God's abundant compassion is revealed. Now this man who was raised would in due course die again. But all the raising stories in the Gospels are to be seen as a foretaste of Easter. They point forward to the day when Jesus, the Lord, the Son of God, would finally break the power of death for everyone once and for all. That is why we don't hear of dead people being raised today. Jesus, the true human being, who stands for us all, has been raised as the pledge that we will also be raised and share the life and joy and peace of the Kingdom of God.

But you know, the truth is, as Christians we have *already* experienced so many of the gifts of the coming Kingdom. We know the depth of God's love; we know the wonder of the forgiveness of sins; we already experience something of the peace that passes human understanding. And those gifts we experience alongside our frail humanity with its illnesses and afflictions, its pains and sorrows. We can begin to anticipate now what healing and wholeness means.

Twelve months ago today, I was lying in the RVI awaiting an operation to put back together my shattered left knee after my fall on Hadrian's Wall. I'm so grateful to the surgeon who operated, the nurses who cared for me, the physiotherapists, and the love and support of so many who prayed and offered practical help to Janet and myself. A year on, well, I can walk and I can drive, but I know the knee will never be what once it was; for example, I can't run. But I've learned to accept what I can't do, and rejoice in what I can do. And I've certainly grown in empathy for all who have mobility issues as most of us do as we age. I wish the accident hadn't happened; I still have pain. But I've also received so much healing grace. And in heaven I will run.

Next week, we simply open ourselves to God and his presence in our lives. I never set limits on what the Lord can do. When we go forward for prayer some may be overwhelmed by a sense of God's love; some may feel in a new way the depths of Christ's compassion; some may be given the grace of acceptance, some may find that distress has been soothed by God's peace. And I hope all of us will know that whatever afflicts us on earth in body, mind or spirit, then one day we will find total healing in the joy of heaven. All the gifts of grace we have and do receive, are the pledge of that ultimate healing to come. Thanks be to God.