



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity Ephesians 3:13-21 & St. Luke 7:11-17 Fr. William Klock

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“The next day,” says St. Luke in our Gospel lesson, “Jesus went to a town called Nain.” No doubt to preach the good news that, in him, the God of Israel had finally come to his people to fulfil his promises to them. No doubt to heal the sick or the blind or the deaf or whoever else came to him to be healed. No doubt to cast our demons. Not just to *tell* them that God’s kingdom was breaking into darkness of the world, but to *show* them. To make the sad things untrue, as Sam Gamgee put it so eloquently. But I expect that Jesus was frustrated. Sure, crowds were following him wherever he went, but they didn’t *get* it. They wanted their own personal miracle worker and, like the people in Nazareth, they got angry with him when he wouldn’t stay. They knew—because it was impossible to miss—that in Jesus light had come into the darkness. They knew hope for the first time. But their vision of God’s light and life was just so, so, so small. And then there were people like the scribes and Pharisees who were angry because, if he was the Messiah, he was doing it all wrong. They couldn’t see past their rules and boundaries. They had no grasp of the great height and width and length and depth of the love of God. They were thrilled to have Jesus wipe away their tears and make the sad things of their lives untrue, but they were still committed to, still doing the very things that made the sadness in the first place.

Luke says here, in 7:11, that this happened on the “next day”. It was the day before that Jesus had been met

by the friends of a Roman centurion with a sick slave. He got word that Jesus was on his way to his house to heal his slave and sent words to say, “No, don’t come to my house.” He knew that as a gentile he wasn’t part of Jesus’ mission. “No, Jesus, just say the word and my slave will be healed. I know you’ve got authority to do it.” And Jesus stopped and marvelled. He healed the centurion’s slave, but he also turned and rebuked the crowd that was following him: “How is it that I’ve found more faith in this gentile than in you lot, in God’s own people?”

And now, it’s the next day, and he’s on his way to Nain and the crowd has followed him from Capernaum. It’s about five miles. And all the way he’s been teaching his disciples and anyone else within earshot who will listen. I expect Jesus was trying to broaden their vision of the kingdom and what it all meant. And then they arrived at the city gate. Luke writes, “As he got near the gate of the city, a young man was being carried out dead. He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. There was a substantial crowd of townspeople with her.”

From a distance Jesus noticed that the town gate was unusually quiet and now he sees why. Or maybe he heard it before he could see it, because as they got to Nain they met a burial procession coming through the gate. There was the stretcher being carried by pallbearers and on it was the body of a young man. Following behind was his mother, crying her eyes out and wailing loudly. I wonder if Jesus knew them. Nain wasn’t far from Capernaum or from Nazareth, so it’s entirely possible that Jesus knew these people or, at least, knew who they were. Luke knew enough about them to report that the woman was a widow and that the young man was her only son. Her husband was dead and now so was her only son and that meant that she was destitute. That meant that she was without hope.

The whole town was gathered and they wept and they wailed loudly so

that she could weep without embarrassment. They were on their way to the burial plot outside town. There would have been a little cave. Sort of a family plot, with the bones of her husband’s ancestors. Some time before she’d made this trip with her son by her side as the mourners carried her husband to that little cave and laid him to rest. Eventually, she had gone and put his bare bones in a box, leaving the burial shelf empty. And today she would put her son there. And then what? Come harvest time, she’d have to join the poor, gleaning in the fields and the vineyards, collecting whatever was left behind by the harvesters. And she prayed no one would come to seize her house and turn her out into the street.

And seeing her, Jesus knew her grief. He knew her hopelessness. And I wonder what went through his head. Did he recognise an opportunity here to make a point about the bigger, deeper, wider meaning of the kingdom for the crowd following him? I suspect it occurred to him. But I think, more than anything, Jesus saw in this woman the pain and the sorrow and the tears of this fallen and broken world and he was overcome with love—because that’s who he was. The widow and the orphan have always had a special place in God’s heart. How they were treated was always—and still is—emblematic of whether or not the people had the heart of God themselves. And so I think it was simply the most natural thing in the world for the heart of Jesus to be overwhelmed with love and pity for this woman and he simply did what came naturally to him.

Luke writes, “And when the Lord saw her, he was very sorry for her. ‘Don’t cry,’ he said to her. Then he went up and touched the stretcher and the people carrying it stood still.”

That would have been bad form for anyone else, but not for Jesus. I still expect people were shocked. You didn’t get in the way of a funeral

procession then any more than you do now. But to touch the stretcher—that would render him unclean. So the crowd watched in surprise or shock as Jesus stopped the procession. And they heard him say to the woman, “Don’t cry.” And I can only imagine what they were thinking when he then went to the dead boy and said, “Young man, I say to you, ‘Get up!’” They’d seen Jesus do some amazing things. They’d seen him heal the sick and the blind and the lame, but could he actually raise the dead? That was kind of over the top, even for Jesus. And yet...there were stories from the old days. Could the things in those old stories happen again?

These people were deeply steeped in the scriptures and some of them must have recognised that what Jesus was doing had echoes of the stories they knew so well. I say that because Luke recognised the parallels and makes a point of reporting this story very deliberately so that it echoes the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha—particularly Elijah in 1 Kings 17.

Nine hundred years before, King Ahab had ruled Israel. He was the latest in a line of wicked kings who did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Ahab built an altar to the Canaanite fertility god Baal in the Lord’s temple and he led the people into idolatry and all sorts of unspeakable evils. First Kings says that Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel before him. And so the Lord visited his people with a drought and the drought brought with it a famine. And the Lord announced that drought and famine through the Prophet Elijah, whom he sent to the king. Of course, that made Elijah rather unpopular with the king, so the Lord first led him to a hiding place in the wilderness, where he sent ravens to bring him bread and meat each morning and evening and where he could drink from a creek. But when the creek dried up, the Lord

sent him to the home of a widow and her only son.

The widow had nothing left but enough flour and oil to make a small loaf of bread. When Elijah met her, she was planning to bake the bread for herself and for her son as a last meal. Then they would die. But the Prophet told her to bake the bread for him in faith. If she did that, he said, the Lord would keep her jars of flour and oil full as long as the famine lasted. And so, in faith, she did as he told her and, in response, the Lord provided. All through the famine the Lord took care of her. Neither the flour nor the oil ran out.

And then one day that poor widow’s son became ill and died. And she forgot all that the Lord had done through Elijah to keep her and her son alive and she berated the Prophet for bringing this on her. And so Elijah took the boy and laid him on his bed, and stretching himself over the boy three times, he pleaded with the Lord to restore his life. And the Lord heard and the boy rose up and Elijah took him to his mother. When she saw her boy alive, she declared, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

That, of course, wasn’t the end of the story. This was all to spare Elijah from the wrath of King Ahab and eventually the Lord would send the Prophet back to the King to announce an end to the drought. But it wasn’t quite that simple. The Lord told Elijah to challenge Ahab’s pagan priests to a showdown. Elijah would give them a chance to build and alter, offer a sacrifice, and to pray to Baal to end the drought, before building his own altar, offering a sacrifice, and praying to the Lord. On the mountain, Baal’s priests proved their god’s impotence, while the Lord visited his people: sending down fire to consume Elijah’s offering and then causing it finally to rain, while his priests slaughtered the

priests of Baal who had led the people of Israel into idolatry.

The story of Elijah and the widow of Zerahath, situated in that bigger story of the God of Israel and the defeat of Ahab and his false god, it was a story about the Lord’s love. About the Lord’s love for his people—a love so great that he would not let an evil king lead them off forever into idolatry and evil. It was about the Lord’s love for the poor and destitute. And it was a story of hope. The Lord will not let his people languish forever in sin and darkness and hopelessness. When the time is right, he will visit his people, he will deal with sin and death, he will wipe away the tears, and he will set the world to rights.

And it was that vision of the love of God that the people around Jesus—most of them, at any rate—it was that great vision of the love of God and the restoration of all things that they lacked. When the Messiah came, they struggled to see him as anything more than their personal miracle-worker. When it came to setting things to rights, they had trouble seeing any further than their desire for the Messiah to rain down fire and brimstone on the Romans and their pagan allies. There were all these interest groups in Israel, from the Pharisees to the Sadducees, from the Essenes to the Zealots (well, the Zealots would come a few decades later, but their spiritual fathers were there in Jesus’ day). And they all had their own vision of what the Messiah would be and what he would do and what it would look like when the Lord finally came to visit his people. And their visions of all of that were just so incredibly small and self-centred and lacking in grace and with no real grasp of how truly deep and wide the love of God is. The crude idolatry that Israel had known in Elijah’s day was long gone from Israel, but a more subtle idolatry had taken its place and it blinded people to who Jesus really was and what God was doing through him.

But this day the God of those old “fairy tales” was going to burst into the present—like King Arthur returned to rescue Britain in its darkest hour. That day at the gate of Nain, Jesus—like Elijah and like Elisha (that’s another story Luke echoes, but we don’t have time for this morning)—Jesus stopped the pallbearers, put his hands on the stretcher, and said to the dead boy, “Get up!”. And instead of uncleanness passing from the dead boy to Jesus, the life of the living God passed from Jesus to the dead boy and, Luke tells us, “The dead boy sat up and began to speak, and he gave him to his mother.” And her tears of sorrow turned in tears of joy. Jesus not only raised her son, but he also gave the woman back her own life. But the bigger thing, at least for Luke, was the response of the crowd. “Fear”—or maybe better great awe—“came over all of them. They praised God. ‘A great prophet has risen amongst us!’ they said. ‘God has visited his people!’ And this report went out about him in the whole of Judaea and the surrounding countryside.”

Many wondered if the God of those old stories was real. They hadn’t heard a prophet speak in centuries. The same went for the raising of the dead. And the glory cloud, God’s presence in the temple, had been gone for five hundred years—if it had ever been there at all. But now they knew. The God of Israel was real and alive and he was working through Jesus. But did they really *get* it now? Yes and no, I think. Even the disciples wouldn’t really and fully get it until after they’d encountered Jesus risen from death. And even then, they wouldn’t really, really get it until Pentecost and the sending of the Spirit. But Luke does seem to be saying that the people “got it” more than they had before. They stood in awe because they knew they were somehow and in some way either in the presence of the God of Israel or in the presence of this representative and one who had his power and authority.

They knew they had seen God at work and so they praised him. And when they proclaimed that a great prophet had risen up amongst them and that God has visited his people, they were exuberantly proclaiming that they now knew that God had once again come into the darkness to set things to rights like he had done back in the days of Elijah, because only the living God has such power over death. And so they cheered even if they didn’t understand or even if they still had messed up ideas about what it all meant or how it would play out. They knew that in Jesus God had come to fulfil his promises: to right the wrongs, to wipe away the tears, and I think with this latest miracle, the hope dawned in some—maybe even many—that Jesus had come to defeat even death itself.

It’s important that in telling the story, Luke doesn’t just look backward to Elijah. The story echoes back into Israel’s past, but it also looks forward. Because Luke also deliberately tells this story in a way that anticipates the story we know so well, the story to which all of this is leading. We meet Jesus at the cross, where sin and death did their worst, where Mary wept as he died. And then, three days later as Jesus burst from the tomb alive again, having conquered both sin and death; as he wipes away the tears of another Mary, who mistook him for the groundskeeper because he was there tending the garden, like Adam restored to Eden.

Brothers and Sisters, it’s the final story, the climax of the Gospels, the story to which all these others lead us, it’s there that we’re confronted once and for all by the love of God made manifest in Jesus. God gives his son to die in order to set the world to rights, in order to defeat sin and death, and he does it for the very people who broke his creation and brought sin and death into it when they rebelled against him. That’s love—and grace and mercy and patience and so much more—but above all it’s love. And

Brothers and Sisters, it’s love that overwhelms absolutely everything it encounters. It’s the love that finally opened the eyes of Jesus’ disciples to understand that the Messiah wasn’t their personal miracle worker or that he belonged to Israel alone—to set them on the top of the heap while raining down fire and brimstone on the gentiles. No, the love of God made manifest in the crucified and risen Jesus is the love that reveals a plan to redeem not only Israel, but the nations and even creation itself. And a love that will spare nothing to do so. It was that love, encountered in the risen Jesus, that opened the eyes of Paul and turned him from being a persecutor of Jesus’ people to being an evangelist, an apostle, a gosseller of the gospel—proclaiming the good news of this love made manifest in the death and resurrection of Jesus to the nations.

Paul knew that this love that is already in the process of setting the world to rights, is the same love that will—if we can only begin to grasp its depths—this love will set us to rights. This love will realign our affections and purge us of our idolatries and our sins. This love will reveal the values and systems and plans and things of this old evil age to be the worthless garbage they are and will set our hearts and minds on God and on his kingdom. But for that to happen we have to truly encounter God’s love in Jesus. This is why Paul, in our Epistle today from Ephesians, wrote to struggling Christians to say, “This is my prayer: that [God] will lay out all the riches of his glory to give you strength and power, through his Spirit, in your inner being; that the Messiah may make his home in your hearts, through faith; *that love may be your root, your firm foundation*; and that you may be strong enough (with all God’s saints) to grasp the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the Messiah’s love—though actually it’s so deep that nobody can really know it! So may God will you with all his fullness.”

Brothers and Sisters, if we are still invested in sin, if we are still invested in ourselves, if we are still invested in the things of this age, if we are still looking for philosophy or science or politics or economics to set this broken world to rights, we need instead to focus all the more on Jesus and the cross and to plumb the depths of God's love revealed there until our hearts are aligned with him and with his new creation.

We need to steep ourselves in the love of God that we might know the riches of his glory—riches so great, a vision of new creation so glorious, of all the sad things of this world made untrue—that we fall in love with it and let go all our idols. A pearl of great price so beautiful that we give up everything to have it. But Brother and Sisters, instead we too often lose sight of that vision as we're overcome by the sadness and the pain and the darkness around us. Our faith stumbles and we stop being the on-earth-as-in-heaven people that Jesus and the Spirit have made us. We let the idols creep back in, and we start looking to them—to the things of this fallen world—as the way out and as our hope. And we align ourselves with the very things that have corrupted God's creation, with the very things that hurt our relationships, and that keep us and the people around us from flourishing in God's goodness. In the face of greater evils, we accept the lesser and we do it over and over and over until we've embraced idolatry, lost our vision of God's new creation, and forgotten the true power of the good news of God's love in Jesus.

The solution, Brothers and Sisters, as St. Paul says so often, is to keep our eyes on Jesus and on his kingdom. To daily plumb the depths of the love of God made manifest in Jesus, crucified and risen. If you struggle with sin, if you struggle with selfishness, if you struggle with idolatry, if you struggle to keep God's new creation at the centre of your vision, if your hope is not in Jesus and Jesus alone, hear

Paul's words today: let the love of God in Jesus be your root and your firm foundation.

Let's pray: O Lord, let your continual pity cleanse and defend your church; and because it cannot continue in safety without your aid, protect it by your help and goodness for ever, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*