

Sermon for 6th June 2010
Jesus raises the widow's son at Nain
Trinity 1 (Luke 7:11-17 Galatians 1:11-24)

I've never experienced Middle Eastern grief. Have you? But I have experienced African grief, and it's not tidy and polite like British grief – it's a wild and noisy outpouring of grief. Perhaps it would be better if we in the West expressed grief more openly, because for most of us the wailing is going on inside anyway. And when we hear about terrible events like those in Cumbria this week our hearts go out to those people mourning the deaths of sons and daughters, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters and friends that they have loved deeply. And we want to cry with them.

How would you picture the scene in Nain that day? Close your eyes, if you'd like to, and try to picture it. I picture paid mourners wailing their way through the streets and a small woman clothed in black with ashes on her low-bowed head walking behind a roughly-made coffin, probably all she could afford. A pathetic scene; a grief-stricken community, sharing in the immensity of the loss experienced by this woman. Not only is the joy of her life dead, but her security is gone. Who will provide for her now? How will she, a woman alone in 1st century Palestine, eke out a living now? Who will speak for her? The community has come out in force to support her, yet she feels alone in her grief. Perhaps this story of a grief from so long ago is not so very far away from the emotional experience of those much closer to us.

Jesus and his disciples see the funeral procession as it leaves the city and he immediately perceives the depths of the woman's misery and helplessness. No one asks him to do anything and there is no mention of any one's faith. Unlike Jairus, begging for Jesus to heal his daughter, and being told "just believe", the widow says nothing, asks for nothing. Perhaps she is so overwhelmed by grief that she has no hope. There is nothing to ask for.

But Jesus and knows her helplessness and despair. "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "do not weep."" In another version of the bible his reaction is described like this: 'When Jesus saw her, his heart broke. He said to her, "Don't cry.'" Of course the woman is crying, but Jesus encourages her not to despair because he is with her and there is hope.

Did you notice that when Jesus looks at the woman with compassion, Luke calls "the Lord" (this is the first time Luke calls Jesus that). Jesus' compassion is a revelation of God's compassion, just as the power he will display is an expression of God's power.

Throughout the story, the focus is on Jesus' response to the woman's suffering. He takes the initiative. He sees her pain and isolation and he acts out of sheer compassion for her. There's an additional poignancy here for us who know the rest of the story, because we are reminded that one day Jesus' own widowed mother we lose her only son.

When Jesus touches the coffin, the bearers stand still, no doubt horrified. He has broken the purity laws by touching that which is untouchable. What is going on? Jesus then addresses a young man and his words have life-giving power. The young man is raised to life and Jesus gives him back to his mother. This stranger has restored to her world; at the same time, he has changed it forever.

The crowd remember an old story they would know well, when the prophet Elijah raised a widow's son and they start shouting that Jesus is a great prophet, and the message of this miracle spreads like wild-fire.

How are we supposed to react to this story? Some of us might not take it too seriously, certainly not literally, because it took place a long time ago and doesn't make sense in a 21st century science-focused world. Some of us may doubt the boy was really dead, perhaps he was in a deep vegetative state, or perhaps this is not meant to be literal but an allegory for a spiritual re-awakening for the boy. Perhaps some of us are angry when we hear this story. Why did Jesus raise this boy from the dead and not others. What was special about this woman? Why was the one I loved not brought back to life when I prayed so hard? What about those who are grieving now, not least the families of people killed in Cumbria and on the aid ships in Gaza?

In our deepest grief and fiercest struggles, most of us long to feel God beside us, transforming our sufferings. But sometimes we may be so blinded by misery that we are unaware of God, or even shut him out. Like the widow of Nain, we may be paralysed by grief and unable to ask anything of God. Even in that darkness, God is beside us; when we are closed to him, have no faith or hope – that's what this story tells us. Jesus reached out to touch the coffin, and he reaches out to touch the untouchable places in our lives too.

I invite you to close your eyes again. Take a moment to remember the pain of the people of Cumbria, and reflect on your own pain and heartache. Imagine Jesus looking at you and his heart breaking because of your pain. Imagine him speaking to you. What does he say that brings you hope?

Lord Jesus, whose heart broke for love of this woman in her pain: bring hope and peace to our hearts and to the hearts of all those who are grieving today, that we and they might know that you have triumphed over death and come to us to bring transformation, new life and renewed hope. Amen.

Blessings,
Gill