

## Trinity 16

I take as my text from today's Gospel:

*And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.*

Today, our Gospel passage is about *compassion* — the **Divine Compassion** of Jesus and the lesson it teaches us —and about the absolute *Divine Power* of Jesus Christ.

As we continue to talk about a loving God, we acknowledge what we have learned from Scripture — that God is Love. Now, we come to explore another aspect of God demonstrated most emphatically by Jesus in today's Gospel passage from St. Matthew.

God is compassionate — he is not apathetic and without feeling but truly compassionate and loving.

Listen again to what Luke says:

*And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.*

That is a very poignant statement.

But what is *Compassion*? Merriam-Webster defines it as *a feeling of wanting to help someone* who is in need, or more fully, *sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.*

Even more than that — *compassion* in the truest sense is very personal and elicits a deep feeling, a feeling that we describe most often as *empathy*.

It is not the same as witnessing from a distance the plight of refugees or the victims of earthquakes, the devastation of floods, or hurricane ravaged areas, and then, out of *sympathy*, being motivated to help from a distance unaffected personally by what we witness.

Yes, we may be *sympathetic* to their plight; but *true compassion* comes from up-close, personal experience — *an up-close, personal experience* where we internalize the experience and feel what the other person is experiencing and something comes over us and through us that we call *compassion*.

*Compassion* — a human quality that reflects a person's character and is paramount as a Christian trait.

So, in the Gospel passage from St. Luke, we find that it is not just the recounting of a miracle; it is an exposition of the *power* and *compassion* of Christ demonstrating the complexity of his human and **Divine Natures**, a truly remarkable story.

The scene is the town of **Nain**, located about 10 miles southeast of Nazareth and just within the region of Galilee.

Jesus is traveling through the area with a number of his disciples when, as they approach the town gate, they come across a funeral procession.

Perhaps, the noise of the procession, and the presence of a large crowd, gained their attention. In those days, it was customary, and even considered an act of mercy and kindness to follow the corpse to the grave.

The funeral procession would make its way outside the town, for no one was buried within towns or cities. And customarily, it would be led by a band of professional mourners with their flutes and cymbals.

They would be followed by friends, relatives, and other on-lookers. The dead person would be carried on a bier or pallet, not in a coffin, and the burial would take place within 24 hours of death.

Luke is simple and direct in describing the situation:

*....behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow....*

Jesus was moved at what he saw: the dead son of a widow, her only son and means of support. He was so moved he said to the woman, *Weep not*, and went up and touched the bier. The procession stopped and Jesus said, *Young man, I say unto thee, Arise*.

The young man sat up immediately and began to speak, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. What *compassion* — from Luke's description, Jesus literally gave the young man back to his mother, a gift of **Divine Love**.

Notwithstanding, those around were astonished. Luke says, *And there came a fear on all...* Perhaps, a better word would be *awe*, as it wasn't a feeling of dread or terror but, rather, a reverence for what they had witnessed. Often, the word *fear* as it is used in the Bible really means *awe*.

I would imagine that even today amid all the cynicism and skepticism of today's world, such an event would be *awe-inspiring*.

Interestingly, Luke is the only one of the **New Testament** writers to recount this particular resurrection story. It is one of three such miracles performed by Jesus during his ministry. The other two were the raising to life of Jairus's daughter and the raising of Lazarus.

We may note that today's lesson for **Morning Prayer** from the Gospel of John is the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

These three *resurrection miracles* are seen as a progression: the daughter of Jairus had just died when Jesus awakened her; the widow's son had been dead a full day; and Lazarus had been buried for four days when Jesus called him forth from the grave.

It is as if Jesus was demonstrating with each instance more and more certainly that he indeed had power over life and death. With each resurrection miracle, there were more witnesses, and the witnesses were more diverse including at the last his opponents.

And with the resurrection of Lazarus, the power of Jesus was even more clear. By this, according to the custom of the day, the spirit, by the fourth day, would have clearly left the body and its vicinity; it would no longer be lingering above the dead person as the Jews believed it did for several days after burial.

Thus, it was perfectly clear, after this amount of time had passed, that only a divine act could restore life to the person.

So, it should have been obvious to all present at the time that in restoring life to Lazarus, Jesus had demonstrated, without a doubt, his **Divine Power**.

While there are other resurrection accounts in the Bible, specifically **Old Testament** accounts of **Elijah** and **Elisha** raising the dead, the difference is obvious. The two prophets did not of themselves restore the dead to life; rather, with much prayer, they invoked God to do so. They lacked the authority and command we see in Jesus, and they were merely instruments through whom God worked his miracles.

In Luke's account, we see the absolute **Power** of Jesus: with just a word, instantly the young man sits up and speaks.

Recall the raising of Jairus's daughter, as well as of Lazarus: effortlessly, in full command, Jesus called each from the sleep of death.

With the daughter of Jairus, Jesus *took her by the hand, and the maid arose.*

And with Lazarus, Matthews says:

*And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.*

*And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes...*

These miracles demonstrated that while others of his day may claim to heal the sick, none other than Jesus Christ could raise the dead. Proof beyond doubt that he is the Son of God, a loving and compassionate God.

We see a demonstration of his *compassion* by his tenderness toward the sorrowing widow; his delivering the young man to his mother to tend to her as a dutiful son.

Jesus understood the widow's plight; he could feel her grief. Jesus does not distance himself from those who need him; in him there is no apathy.

However, to attribute to God such *compassion* would be contrary to ancient thinking, especially among the Stoics who viewed apathy as the primary characteristic of God. God was deemed to be without feeling, the rationale being that if someone can make another happy, or joyful, sad, or sorrowful, then, they can exert influence over that person, at least for the moment, and thus they would be the greater.

Therefore, if no one can be greater than God, it follows, then, that God must be without feeling. And, if without feeling, where would there be *love* or *compassion*?

But, here, we see Jesus, the Son of God, being so moved that in a display of great *compassion*, he succors the woman in her grief by raising to life her dead son, a *compassion* that is present throughout his ministry as he heals the sick; heals those who are physically afflicted, and those whose lives and souls are tormented by their sinfulness.

From these resurrection miracles we learn of the **Divine Power** and **Compassion** of Jesus Christ who has dominion over death; who loves us, pities us; who shows forth his tender mercies towards us; who is the earthly reflection of God himself; and that through faith in him as Lord and Saviour, we too can be resurrected from another death — the death of sin — and be regenerated as children of God through *Baptism*.

In Jesus Christ, we see God's **Love** for each of us, a **Love** that exceeds our comprehension and are reassured that we too at the last day will be resurrected.

What comfort in knowing that God who is **All Powerful**, **All Knowing**, and **All Loving**, is not apathetic and without feeling but truly **compassionate** and **loving** just as we should be.