

Trinity 16

I take as my text from today's Gospel:

“...when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. 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.

What is Compassion? It's used frequently in the New Testament. 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.*

I would dare say that compassion in the truest sense is personal, and elicits a deep feeling that we describe most often as empathy.

It is not the same as witnessing the plight of, say, refugees shown on television or the victims of the hurricane ravaged areas, and, then, out of sympathy, being motivated to help from a distance where we are unaffected personally by what we witness.

We may be sympathetic to their plight but true compassion comes from up-close, personal experience.

Moreover, compassion is a human quality that reflects a person's character, and is paramount as a Christian trait.

Thus, as we examine the Gospel passage we heard today from St. Luke, we find that it is not just the recounting of a miracle; it is an exposition of the compassion of Christ that demonstrates the complexity of His human and divine Natures.

The miracle of the widow's son being restored to life is one of those truly remarkable stories recounted from our Lord's ministry in that it shows both the power and the compassion of Jesus.

The scene is the town of Nain located about 5 miles or so from Nazareth. It lay between Mt. Moreh and Mt. Tabor, quite a ways north from Jerusalem, 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 gained their attention because of the crowd and, apparently, the dead person was well-known and respected. In those days, it was customary, and even considered an act of mercy and kindness to follow the corpse to the grave.

The funeral process in those days would make its way from the town, for no one was buried within towns or cities, 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.

Even today amid all the cynicism and skepticism, such an event would be “awe-inspiring.”

Interestingly, Luke is the only one of the New Testament writers to recount this story of the resurrection of a dead person. 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.

If you are following the Lectionary in the front of the Prayer Book, you may have noted that the lesson for Morning Prayer today is the account from the Gospel of John 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. With the resurrection of Lazarus, even the opponents of Jesus were present.

There are other resurrection accounts in the Bible, in particular, Old Testament accounts of Elijah and Elisha raising the dead; but 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.

However, here, in Luke’s report, 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.

As in the case of Jairus’s daughter recounted in the ninth chapter of Matthew (9:25):

But when the people were put forth, he went in, and took her by the hand, and the maid arose.

And of Lazarus from the eleventh chapter of John:

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...

There is a greater significance, too, in these miracles. 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 was the Son of God.

Here, particularly, we also see His compassion; 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.

To attribute to God such compassion would be contrary to ancient thinking, especially among the Stoics. Under Stoicism, apathy was the primary characteristic of God. God was deemed to be without feeling.

There was a rationale behind this thought. If someone can make another happy, or joyful, sad or sorrowful, then, they can influence 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 that God must be without feeling.

But, here, in this particular story, we see Jesus, the Son of God, being moved to the depths of His Being and in a display of great compassion, succors the woman in her grief by raising to life her dead son.

This compassion 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.

In Jesus, we see and come to know God's Love for each of us, a love that exceeds our comprehension.

What, then, do we learn from these resurrection miracles?

That Jesus Christ has dominion over death; that He loves us, pities us, and shows forth His tender mercies towards us.

Moreover, we learn that through faith in Him as Lord and Saviour, we too can be resurrected from the death of sin and be regenerated as children of God.

That regeneration comes through baptism, and is sustained through the Church and her Sacraments, not without faith, but most certainly through the undeserved, unearned Grace of God.

But it is faith that is so essential to our salvation. Belief. A belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Before raising Lazarus, Jesus spoke with Martha, assuring her of the New Covenant, the promise that was fulfilled in Him:

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

So, we are reassured that as each was resurrected, Jairus' daughter, the widow's son, and Lazarus, as Christ Himself was resurrected, so we too at the last will be resurrected.

How comforting, how reassuring: our eternal existence will not be as some nebulous spirit. No, we will be resurrected at the last, and clothed in a spiritual body suitable for eternal life with our Heavenly Father.

How comforting is the knowledge that God is not apathetic and without feeling but truly compassionate and loving.

We know this through Jesus Christ, who, by taking upon Himself our flesh, embraced our human feelings and emotions.

Yes, God is all powerful and all knowing; but He is also all Loving, truly our heavenly Father, and, through Jesus Christ, feels with compassion our individual human plight.