

Lessons 1 Kings 17: 8 – 16 Galatians 1: 11 – 24 St Luke 7: 11 – 17

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Holy God, bless our spiritual seeking, our meditations this day; may we know You through music, words sung and said, through Scripture and silence. May we know the peace, the sacred calm, that only You can give. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.

Jesus said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise!' In our Gospel story this morning, we join Jesus as He and His disciples arrive at the gates of Nain, a city south of Jesus' home town of Capernaum. As they do so, the body of a young man who has died is being carried on a bier to a grave outside the city walls. It is a scene of mourning and distress. Tears stream down the face of the young man's mother. Her grief is raw. What are we to make of this story?

Jesus has just come from Capernaum. When He was there, Jesus encountered a Roman centurion who had sought healing for his slave. You may remember that Jesus commended the centurion for his incredible faith. The slave was healed: when the centurion returned home he found his slave in good health. The story is an icon of what faith means: the Roman officer had complete trust in

Jesus. What now of the young man who had died and to whom Jesus said, 'Arise!'

In the Gospels, there are other stories in which people are raised from the dead. The twelve year old daughter of Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, fell ill and died. Jesus went to her, entered the family home, held her hand and said, 'Little girl, arise.' At Bethany, Jesus wept over the death of His friend, Lazarus. Standing outside the cave where the body of Lazarus had been laid, Jesus said, 'Lazarus, come forth!' Now, in the city of Nain, Jesus stops a funeral procession and lays His hand on the bier.

In the life of Jesus, there are numerous times when the tears and suffering of people are mentioned. In the home of a Pharisee, an unnamed woman bathes the feet of Jesus with her tears and dries them with her hair. In the courtyard outside the residence of the High Priest, Peter, the principal disciple, weeps bitterly after denying Jesus three times. On the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Grief, the road that Jesus walked with the cross to His crucifixion, women, daughters of Jerusalem, wept for Him. At the very beginning of His ministry, in His first sermon to His disciples and the crowd, in the Gospel of Luke,

Jesus said, 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.' Tears and human suffering accompanied Jesus throughout His ministry or, put another way, Jesus is present in tearful moments. To the young man on the bier, Jesus said, 'I say to you, arise!' What are we to make of this story from the city of Nain?

Whatever else this story means it cannot mean that, by divine power, Jesus brought back to physical life a young man who had died. If we are to take the plain or literal meaning of the story, what conclusions can we draw from that? *That* Jesus was able to raise people from the dead, bring them back to life? Well, if so, why only three people? What difference does it make to our life today if He actually, physically, raised three people from the dead? Today, children and young men die, but are not raised from the dead; they do not rejoin their families. The tragic story of the toddler, Liam Fee, is a case in point: children are not brought back to life in this life. The story must mean something else.

It is not a display of supernatural power by God. God works in and through the natural processes of the universe God created and sustains. Neither can the story from the city of Nain be about a

person whom people believed to be dead but then recovered: rightly, if that is all that is happening here, we would consider the narrative to reflect primitive ignorance about the human body. It cannot be that.

In Scripture, in the Gospels, we are reading theology, *thoughts about God*, expressed through carefully crafted stories. It is through the process of engaging with these narratives, entering into the scene, that we encounter the Mystery we call God. After all these years at Mayfield Salisbury, it should come as no surprise to you that the New Testament story about the young man at Nain is a *re-imagining* of an Old Testament story. In the First Book of Kings, the prophet Elijah brings back to life the son of a widow. The parallels between the Old and the New are strong, including the fact that those raised from the dead are not exclusively Jewish. In a sense, the story about Jesus shows that, like Elijah, the rabbi from Nazareth is a great prophet but, equally, within the Jewish tradition, stories about the raising of the dead are an established genre: the story of Jesus at Nain is not unique.

Young man, arise! Little girl, arise! The Greek word behind our word 'arise' is the same one which is used of Jesus rising from the dead. These are stories, *word icons*, which tell us that, in life, in this life, in the present moment, even as we journey to death, we are able to taste the risen life: eternity is now. God is no less present than He has ever been and no more present than He ever will be, but union with the Holy, with the One who embraces all, who holds us in life, is a door ready to be pushed. In his letter to the church community in Galatia, St Paul said that God was revealed *in* him: the change was a moment of inner transformation. The apostle said, 'In me.' Through your spiritual imagination, let yourself be in that procession, be that widow, that young man dead on the bier, in the crowd, in earshot of Jesus. Let the word, 'Arise', be said within your soul. God works in and through us, in and through creation, not by tricks and magic and supernatural fireworks.

Encountering God is supremely life-changing. If we are not looking for God, not listening for God and not opening ourselves to the possibility of intimacy with the Divine, we have a much reduced chance of finding God. What is striking about the passage of the young man from Nain is that Jesus touches the bier. In Jewish

custom, this makes Him ritually unclean or, looked at another way, in touching the body of the young man, Jesus cleanses it of all that stains and deforms it. This is the gospel: on our pilgrimage, as we walk with Jesus, in search of the Eternal, we are accepted by God, touched, cleansed and healed. There is no uncleanness that God cannot face, no failure that God refuses to forgive, and no brokenness that God will not embrace.

An American pastor, Margaret Torrence, describes being called to the home of a family late one evening. She had received news of the death of a church member and friend. As she arrived the ambulance was pulling away. Margaret writes:

I assumed that his body lay in the back of their vehicle. When I entered the house....it was a few minutes before I realised that my friend's body, still warm, was in the bedroom, just a few feet away.....We all moved to be with him: family and friends, neighbours, a healthcare worker and her dog. We sat [around the bed], we knelt on the floor; in jeans and pyjamas, perfectly dressed, we formed an unlikely congregation as we anointed his body with oil and our tears, and gave him back to God.

This is an excellent story of declaring our faith: our conviction that death is not the end and we know that because, in life, we taste eternity. Those gathered around their friend who had died, though greatly grieving, they lived the risen life. It is a privilege of ministry

to be with someone in their last hours of life, to be silent together and, in prayer, be present to the Presence. Eternity is not something we gain in death, something we have never had before. Eternity is now.

Over the past week, I have had the real joy of participating in three separate inter-faith events. The first was a time of 'Scripture Reasoning', in which Jews, Muslims and Christians share and explore their sacred texts together. The second was the Peace Walk in which pilgrims of different faiths visited sacred spaces representing Christianity, Baha'i, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh. At Gurdwara, the Sikh temple, I along with other religious leaders offered blessings upon our different communities. Speaker after speaker spoke about celebrating the beauty and holiness of humanity. In that holy place, compassion trumped doctrine. I believe it warmed the heart of God to have so many faiths sitting down together, affirming each other. For Jairus and his daughter, for the Roman centurion and his slave and for the widow and her son at Nain, Jesus was moved by compassion. In the Sikh temple, the Buddhist meditation room and in each of the other holy places, one sensed the Sacred, each a place

in which people gathered to discern spiritual wisdom. Eternity is now. To each of us, Jesus says, 'Arise'.

Amen.