

Pent 2 2010 "Death and Life Collide"
Luke 7:11-17

In today's Gospel lesson we see a head-on collision between a funeral procession, rolling out of the city and a procession of folks following Jesus on his way into the city of Nain. Death collides with Jesus, the giver of life. When death, sickness, sorrow collide with Jesus, Jesus wins and we witness a life, health and joy. Jesus collided with death and destroyed it. Jesus spoke a simple WORD to a dead man and brought him back to life.

This radical power we call the gospel or "good news". It is really good news in a world that cringes in the face of death. The gospel is God's thundering voice which cries "YES" in a world full of "NO". "Yes" to life, Yes to hope, Yes to love, Yes to a grief stricken mother who had already lost her husband and now had lost her only son. The world was pulling her son down into the grave, the final crushing "NO", but Jesus said "Yes" to life.

Let's look at this brief encounter between Jesus and the forces of death. Jesus was about to enter the town of Nain, about 5 miles SE of his hometown of Nazareth. There he saw a funeral procession. Listen to the text again... "**As he drew near to the gate of the city, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. A large crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, he was moved with pity for her and said to her, "Do not weep." He stepped forward and touched the coffin; at this the bearers halted, and he said, "Young man, I tell you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother."**

The text does not say much about Nain or its inhabitants. In fact nothing else is mentioned in scripture about this town. Its only claim to fame is that Jesus visited there and raised this young man to life. Jesus visited Nain and by his word alone, threw a thunderbolt of life and hope into a world full of grief and death. He did it with a simple, direct word of command, "**Young man, I say to you, rise!**" Now, what prompted Jesus to act like this? Why did he do it? There is no mention of the young man's worthiness which would inspire Jesus to act on his behalf, no mention of his character, no indication of his being a good or bad son. Nothing is said of the woman either. She probably didn't even know Jesus. Nothing is said of her deserving help or special consideration. So why did Jesus do it? The text says simply, that "**Jesus was moved with pity**" for the woman. Satan laughs at our suffering and death but "**Jesus was moved with pity.**" The woman was a widow and had only one son and now he was dead.

In Jewish society at the time of Jesus, being a childless widow was a double wammy. Let me quote from an article in Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, "In every code except the Hebrew code, a widow had rights of inheritance but in Hebrew law she was completely ignored. One reason for this strange neglect may be the Hebrew belief that (a man's) death before old age was a calamity, a judgment for sin which was extended to the wife that was left. It was therefore a disgrace to be a young widow." (Interp. Dict. Vol. 4 p. 842). This was called the "doctrine of retribution". You get what you deserve. It comes from an interpretation of the 2nd Commandment which says, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who that hate me." (Exodus 20:5). In Jewish society a woman was totally dependent upon her husband for her living and if he died she was dependent upon her sons and then upon her brothers-in-law (if they were not too poor to take her in). To be a widow meant you were dependent on extended family. So now, not only was this poor woman in grief over the loss of a husband but now her only son was dead also.

Jesus did not know this woman...she is one of the host of nameless faces of history that we, will one day join. Yet Jesus had pity on her and acted to restore her world. Jesus acted out of compassion for one of the weak and helpless ones in the world who got entangled in the cruel unfairness of the world.

Jesus acted out of simple, yet powerful compassion for the widow and gave her what her heart desired most and what she needed most. Jesus simply spoke a word of command. Jesus spoke to the living who heard his voice. Jesus also spoke to the dead and they heard his voice too! He spoke to the young man, "Young man, I say to you, rise! The dead man sat up and began to speak." And then the text says..."He gave him to his mother." How simply elegant is the work of Jesus. No playing to the crowd for approval, no attempt to gain notoriety for himself. Jesus was simply concerned about this woman's needs for security and provision for her livelihood. He gave the young man back to his mother. Back to the responsibilities of life, back to the community, back to the work-a-day world of caring for one another in family and community. You see how God cares for us in our everyday lives? You see it in the way Jesus cared for this woman.

What about the people who witnessed this event? What did it do to the social conventions, the recognized rules and regulations surrounding death? Again, Jesus swept them aside as easily as a child sweeps an arm across a table and throws everything all over the floor. Jesus touched the coffin. To touch a dead body was taboo. This in Jewish law would have made Jesus ritually unclean, unable to eat with

others, unable to go to synagogue, unclean. You can almost hear the crowd gasp as he touched the coffin. Yet Jesus swept aside the rules of proper conduct to meet a woman's desperate need. Jesus was not afraid of death. He waded right into battle with death. He stood toe to toe with death, took it by the throat and choked it until it coughed up the one it had devoured. Jesus touched death and his powerful word brought the dead back to life. He had the power of God to create life, to sustain life and give the dead new life.

Now I'm sure that the people in Nain knew their scriptures. They knew Genesis and its record of the creation where God spoke a word and created life. The people watched and listened as Jesus spoke with the same authority and power as God and his word created life in a dead man. The people were shocked by what happened. The text says that **"fear seized them all"**. Yeah, I'll bet it did! And they praised God for what had happened. No doubt many people believed from that day onward that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, even God who holds the power of life.

And what about us? What does this story of a dead man raised to life do to us today as we face a world full of death and grief? It gives us HOPE in the midst of our own grief and sorrow. It gives us HOPE in a world that seems to be coming unraveled in seemingly endless violence, wars, sickness and death. When we hear this story it gives us hope that God has not abandoned this world or we who live in it. God has plans for us. BIG PLANS! God has plans for our future and his plans include new life...restored life...hope and joy.

This hope gives us courage. Courage to live life without fear for this new life that God has promised pulls us into the future where death has lost its power to afflict or frighten or control us. Death has been conquered by Jesus.

And so when the world which is full of trouble and sorrow and tragedy and death lays its heavy hand on you or one you love...listen. Listen for the word of Jesus. His word comes with the awesome authority of God who gave you life...the voice that says, **"Do not be afraid."** **"Behold, I make all things new... Now "rise"!** And what more can we say, but thanks be to God! AMEN