

Trinity 16, 2017 – Resurrection, Ansonia

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

We have seen this picture far too many times. It is the picture of the weeping widow and the grieving mother. Almost every day and for far too many years, we have had to contemplate the spectacles of unbearable griefs and unspeakable sorrows. A mother in Israel weeps uncontrollably at the death of her son killed by a suicide bomber. A Palestinian woman bereft at the loss of her son killed by Israeli soldiers or by his own hand in the zeal for glory at the price of others' destruction. Gold Star mothers grieving the death of their sons shot down in their helicopter over Afghanistan. Such pictures have become the commonplaces of our culture and, paradoxically, the commentary upon our capacity for compassion.

We have, I fear, become too accustomed to such sights. Grief has become politicized; our emotions have become the battleground for competing political causes; but the real casualty is compassion. Compassion has been killed in us. In its place, there reigns frustration and rage, cynicism and despair at our own impotence. We look upon what we cannot control or perhaps even begin to comprehend. We look and then we look away. No wonder that we want to run away. Any vestiges of compassion that we might once have felt are swallowed up in bitterness and anger.

And yet, perhaps, another glance at this gospel story might help us to look again and to look again with eyes of compassion, not just cynical disdain, to look with hearts of patient hopefulness, not just crippling despair. Perhaps, just perhaps, there is something here that speaks to the unspeakable griefs of our world and day. In our cynicism and despair, we are like the young man who is dead and who is being carried to his grave. But in the looking again at this poignant picture of a widow's grief and a mother's sorrow, perhaps, just perhaps, we shall be raised up in the hope that arises from the compassion of Christ.

That is what this story is all about. It is all about the compassion of Christ, not only for the widow of grief and the mother of sorrow, but also for the whole of our humanity even in the bitter anger of our sorrows and frustrations. When compassion is killed in us, as I fear it so easily is, then we are doubly dead, even more, dead three times over - dead to one another, dead to ourselves and most assuredly, dead to God.

The love of God reaches out and touches. It heals and restores. That love is made visible in the compassion of Christ. Something of the infinite extent of God's love is somehow brought near. Jesus reaches out to us. He came near, first, to the gates of the city of Nain, then, to the bier carrying the young man who was dead. He reaches out and touches. He speaks healing words, first, to the bereaved mother and then, to the dead. He restores him, first, to life and then, to his mother and to his community. There is resurrection.

The compassion of Christ is the moving force in this story. *“And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her”*. It makes tangibly real the love of God, the love which comes into our midst to touch, to heal and to restore. But there is

something more here as well. The love of God made visible and tangibly real in the compassion of Christ does not only come near to us; it enters into the very fabric of our lives so that it may shape our lives in love and compassion. The love of God which here reaches out and touches, heals and restores is to be the moving force in our lives.

Everything begins from that look of Christ. What kind of a look is it? Is it a look of condemnation and contempt or a look of compassion and care? “*When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her*”. His look is his gaze of compassion upon the sorrows of our humanity in the concrete reality of this woman’s seemingly inconsolable grief. She has lost everything that matters - her husband and now her only son. She is utterly bereft. Perhaps, just perhaps, our insensitive hearts can begin to sense the absolute depth of her loss. Yet he looks upon her with the eyes of compassion.

“*Salvation begins by our being seen by Jesus, by his turning toward us his compassionate eyes*”. But what does that compassion mean? It is a strong word, not a word for our contemporary political games which play with our emotions and mess with our minds. No. Here is a word which speaks to the innermost principle of our being as humans, a word which, in the gospels, suggests that core principle of our identity where we are recalled to the God in whose image we are made. Compassion is about more than just a feeling for others, an emotion which can be manipulated and abused.

The word refers to the inmost principle of personal identity. Jesus’ looking with compassion means that he takes the grief of this woman into himself, into the inner recesses of his being where his humanity holds converse with the Father and the

Holy Spirit. Therein lies healing and salvation, hope and resurrection. For these are the things which flow out from Christ's look of compassionate regard. "*Young man, I say unto thee arise*" and "*he delivered him to his mother*". Death and resurrection. Out of the compassionate gaze of Christ comes hope and resurrection. His look changes everything. It changes, too, how we look upon the seemingly hopeless and depressingly horrible sorrows and griefs of our world and day.

One of the great legacies of the Enlightenment was the conviction about making things better in the realm of social and political affairs. Voltaire's lively satire of the philosopher Leibniz' celebrated principle that "*this is the best of all possible worlds*" was directed against the complacency of optimism and the cynicism of pessimism, both of which lead to indifference and inaction. If this is "*the best of all possible worlds*", then whatever happens must be good, simply and without qualification, and therefore there is no need and no reason to try to make things better; contrariwise, if this is "*the worst of all actual worlds*", then nothing can be done either. All you can do is "*grin and bear it*", or at least "*grimace and bear it*". But neither Voltaire nor Leibniz were naive about what can and cannot be accomplished. They knew about original sin; they knew about the evil that is potential and actual in all of us. They knew about the tyranny of good intentions and the vanity of our human projections. But Voltaire's satire was also a call for compassion over against judgment, a call for cautious action about what can be modestly done, ultimately, it seems to me, as "*rooted and grounded in the love*" which is greater than the folly of our hearts and the presumption of our minds.

In this gospel story, we discover the hope that conquers despair. In this gospel story, we discover the compassion that patiently perseveres when all seems lost and gone. We are meant to look upon one another through the eyes of Christ who

looks upon all of us compassionately. It does not mean that we can always change things ourselves; it means only that we remain open to the transforming grace of God even in the face of the seemingly intractable problems of the world. Our compassion has to be about placing one another in the compassion of Christ. It means to acknowledge a reality far greater than ourselves and our world; that reality is grace. In the compassionate look of Christ, we see how God looks upon our humanity. We are called to place one another in the heart of Christ, the heart which holds the whole of the sorrowing world before the Father in love. There and only there is compassion.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.