THE WIDOW OF NAIN St Luke 7: 11-16

The healing, or rather the raising from the dead, of the only son of the widow of Nain follows directly on in St Luke’s Gospel chapter 7 from the healing of the centurion’s servant. In the latter account there is a servant who is near the point of death and his master, who is a centurion, no mean rank in the Roman army, comes to intercede with Jesus for his life, knowing full well that the power to do this is perfectly within his gift. Jesus commends him (no that is not the right word), he marvels at him, since a Gentile for whom he did not expressly come or include in the mission when he sent out his disciples, has surpassed Israel in his faith and shown himself to be a member of the ‘New Israel’. These are the people who St Paul will describe as those who live by faith in God, not only by the Law of Moses, as the patriarch Abraham did when he believed in the promise of God. No doubt St Luke, who writes the account in a simple matter of fact way, wants to unfold to us the power which emanated from Christ in his earthly ministry by taking us from the almost dead to the very dead for the first time. As his Gospel continues we shall be introduced even more to the concept of returning from the dead as a not unusual occurrence. The event is very simple and straightforward; its impact is in fact heightened by this simplicity: Jesus is approaching the city of Nain when he meets by chance a funeral cortege in which a crowd are carrying a young man, recently deceased, to his burial place. In attendance is the mother of the son who has already lost her husband. Now with the death of her son she has lost everybody who is close and dear to her. Jesus is overwhelmed by emotion, rather like at the death of his friend Lazarus. He has pity on her and approaches the bier on which her son is being carried and with a brief command restores him to life. The crowds are literally thunderstruck at what Jesus has done and give glory to God. Immediately they proclaim him as a prophet in the dawning of awareness of who Christ is. Later in St Luke’s Gospel this assessment of him will be revised to a much more exalted level, namely ‘the Christ, the son of the living God’.

The account is very reminiscent of the account of Elijah in the Old Testament restoring to life the widow’s son and the dominant emotion is the human compassion of Christ. The woman has hit rock bottom in life. Almost nothing worse could happen to her. And just as in the story of Elijah when he has reached his limit of endurance with Jezebel, perhaps to die herself would be the only way out of her misery. And yet strangely this desperate situation, this supreme cry of hopelessness and helplessness to God somehow transforms the situation. The point of crisis is reached and a way forward is revealed. This pattern of events is sometimes echoed in our own lives too. We reach a point where there is no way forward apparently, but our tears and cries to God, who alone can help us, open a door locked in front of us and suddenly we find a new way in our spiritual journey resulting in a new beginning.

Another aspect of this account which opens up a new dimension of the power of God is the impact the miracle has on the crowd. “Fear seized them all and they glorified God.” The image that it conjures in our minds is like that which we see in the icon of the Transfiguration, where the vision of the transfigured Lord seems to be scattering the onlookers in various directions by its sheer force and intensity. Some of this power will be bestowed on the disciples when they are sent out by Christ to preach to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. In another part of the Gospel we read about the excitement of the seventy when they return from their missionary journey and report the wonderful acts that they have been able to perform in the name of Jesus. “We saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven”. “Even the demons are subject to us in your name.” And Christ has to bring them down to earth quickly by reminding them that although the power of the evil one is subject to them the most important thing to keep in mind is to rejoice that their names are written in heaven. Christ later calls them ‘babes’ in the way that they see manifestations of power as being more important than the feeling of being loved by God. No. It is the other way round. And one of the Fathers of the Church speaks about seeing our own sins as a supreme gift of God, more important than raising the dead.

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But we must remember that this same power is given to us in the Church too though we may not see it sometimes because of our divisions and innate blindness to the workings of God. It is specifically evident in the sacraments, notably that of Holy Communion. This same startling power which we have read about today is contained in the bread and wine, which we shall soon offer to God and receive ourselves. It is given to us who are described as neither wise nor understanding but as ‘babes’ like the disciples. And we are sternly warned to prepare our consciences for this holy act by confessing our sins and asking for and giving forgiveness. Otherwise we shall be burnt by it as St Paul and the Fathers of the Church emphasise. We shall be eating and drinking destruction if we do not approach humbly in the fear of God, with faith and with love. Words we all know well.

Today’s Gospel has something important to say about power and weakness in the Church. The widow is utterly dependent on God and Christ in his compassion comes to her and brings life and hope. This antinomy of weakness and strength are inextricably bound up and deeply complementary in the life of the Church. You are all familiar with the reading from the Epistle for an Apostle where St Paul says to the members of the Church at Corinth that they think themselves strong but he and his fellow apostles think themselves to be the opposite; they are the rubbish or the offscourings of the world. They are persecuted, beaten and subject to every degradation but they in fact are strong through their weakness and we see that the early growth of the Church confirms this fact. St Paul coins the phrase, “When I am weak, then I am strong’. The history of the Orthodox Church under Soviet rule, the sufferings of the Church of the Middle East today in a number of countries and above all the lives of the martyrs are vivid demonstrations of the power of weakness.

It is in our weakness that we approach God today. We are only too aware of our failures, our shortcomings and those areas of our lives which cause us shame. But rather than becoming downcast let us find a sense of peace in that despite all, our names are written in heaven. And like St Paul let us rejoice that through knowledge of these weaknesses, the power of Christ rests upon us. As the final verse of today’s Gospel says, “God has visited his people”. These words are true for us here today and continue forevermore.

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