

09/27/20

16th Sunday after Trinity

Our Compassionate Savior Conquers Death

Luke 7: 11-16

Now it happened, the day after, that He went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and a large crowd.

And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her.

When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.”

So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother.

Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen up among us”; and “God has visited His people.”

And this report about Him went through all Judea and all the surrounding region.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

During the extended time of His Galilean ministry, just after He had healed the servant of a Roman centurion in Capernaum, Luke tells us that Jesus journeyed to the city of Nain, about ten miles to the south of His own home-town of Nazareth. It is there, in that otherwise entirely inconspicuous and unimposing little town, that our Lord performed the wondrous miracle recorded in our Gospel-text for this sixteenth Sunday after Trinity.

Modern-day Nain is an Arab village located in what is now northern Israel; it is today primarily inhabited by Muslims, and one will hardly expect to find much mention there of this episode from Luke’s Gospel. And yet, still to be seen in Nain, though not in a prominent part of the village, is a small chapel erected in the late 19th century by Franciscan friars who were serving there as missionaries. They intended their little shrine to be a monument, however modest, to the encounter in our text between Christ Jesus and the results of human sin—this dramatic meeting between the Lord of Life on the one hand and Satan’s work on the other, this scene of our Savior’s victory over death which served then and still serves today as a picture of His Easter-morning triumph over the grave.

If ever our worship here should seem somewhat “old hat” to us; if ever the story of our redemption should perhaps seem too familiar, too much

of what we have heard before; if we should ever be tempted to take the Gospel of Christ for granted—we can do no better than to follow the lead of those Franciscans and to meditate as they did on this miracle which our Lord performed in Nain. The little chapel built by those missionary friars bears testimony to the sheer wonder that filled their hearts at what Christ Jesus had done there, the wonder of the Gospel which Luke wants to impart also to us.

I

“And when He came near the gate of the city,” Luke writes, “behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow.” In those few words the evangelist presents the tragedies this woman had endured and the desperate plight which had now befallen her. Her husband had previously died, and to be a widow in that ancient world was to be one of the most vulnerable people in all society. Now also her only son was dead. It is painful to imagine her sorrow. And even beyond her grief, her son’s death now left her completely without support, without protection, and with no hopeful prospects for the future. She could expect nothing but a life of loneliness, of poverty, and of dependency on the charity of people in a world in which not many had anything to spare.

And then in our text St. Luke introduces that element of sheer wonder which the Gospel embodies. “When the Lord saw her,” Luke tells us, “He had compassion on her and said to her ‘Do not weep’”—and with those words we encounter the mystery of the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity. That word “compassion” means literally to “suffer along with others”—to feel along with them their pain, their grief, their fear. To have compassion is a sign of our shared humanity, our shared experience, our common capacity—unless it is erased through willful and cruel selfishness—to commiserate with our fellow human beings because we can ourselves feel and thus really understand what they are going through.

The wonder is that here the One who, from His own experience and out of His own humanity, has compassion on this woman—suffers with her, knows her grief—is none other than the Lord Himself, the eternal and all-powerful Son of God who has created all things. His knowledge of this woman’s suffering is not at all abstract—the word Luke uses instead indicates that our Savior physically and deeply felt her sorrow and her fear for the future. It is our humanity that He has truly taken up for Himself in the womb of the holy Virgin. The Man Jesus had been to funerals Himself, had lost loved ones Himself, had provided care for His own mother as this only son had provided for his until his death. It is out of true compassion that our Savior helps this woman in our text. The wonder in Luke’s account here is the same Christmas mystery and wonder which is packed into St.

John's assertion that the eternal Word—the very Son of God—“became flesh and dwelt among us.” It is the wonder of the incarnation.

II

In His mercy, Jesus acts to help this grieving woman. Out of His compassion for her in her sorrow and weakness and fear—because He literally feels her troubles as His own—He directs Himself to her problem. St. Luke writes, “Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, arise.’” And because this seemingly humble-looking Prophet from Galilee is also the Son of God, His word accomplishes His will. Luke continues, “So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And (Jesus) presented him to his mother.”

We—all of us here in this sanctuary—have been in the hospital rooms of the dying, or at visitations in funeral homes, or at funerals for loved ones. We know what death is and what it does and how it is beyond our powers to stop it or remedy it. Dead is dead—that is the experience of the world. But now Jesus of Nazareth speaks to this corpse, “Young man, I say to you, arise,” and the soul of this lad—the only son of the grieving widow—returns to that body. He lives again, breathes again, can speak again, can love his mother and be loved by her again. This astonishing miracle is accomplished purely and simply by Jesus' word. He reaches ahead to His own Easter-morning resurrection, takes hold of the victory over death that He will win for all people, and imparts it to this young man. That is the wonder—the miraculous, life-giving power—which pulses through His word.

III

It is instructive for us, finally, to think about how St. Luke describes the reaction of the many witnesses to this miracle—both those who were coming into the city with Jesus and the large crowd that was accompanying the dead man's casket out through the city-gate. Luke tells us that, gripped by fear and awe, “they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has risen up among us’; and ‘God has visited His people.’” They were not content to keep this miracle to themselves. Luke writes, “And this report about Him went through all Judea and all the surrounding region.” Jesus' compassion for this woman and His word of power filled their hearts and they wanted to tell everyone about these wonders. It would have been strange, in fact, for them not to spread this news. It is not clear from their reaction that these people fully comprehended who Jesus of Nazareth really is. To speak of Him as a “great prophet,” and even to say that His coming showed that God was visiting His people—these words of the people do not necessarily mean that they understood that Jesus Himself is the incarnate One spoken of by

Moses and the psalms and the prophets. But they had witnessed His mercy and His compassion for this woman. They had witnessed His life-giving power. Filled with awe and wonder, they wanted to tell everyone they met.

Luke's report of this episode in our text can be a tonic for us. Our lives are filled with a swirl of worries and cares and toil and responsibilities. And we also take in the news each day and try to digest what we hear about catastrophic fires and barely imaginable floods and a pandemic that threatens. We continue to grow older; our aches and pains become more frequent and more serious. Our mortality looms over us—both because we lose loved ones and because we begin to feel it in our bones. Too often for us, the wonder at the heart of our worship can be covered over and muffled by all this stuff of our earthly lives.

That is why this account in our text is so precious. Here Luke tells us about the Son of God who has taken our flesh to be His own, who has experienced all that we experience except our sin, who has compassion on us from His innermost being, who understands our every need and our every prayer. Here Luke also shows us the life-giving power in our Savior's word—the same life-giving power that flows through His Gospel and through the Sacrament that we share at His altar today. These are the wonders of Christmas and Easter which fill our worship

Like the people of the city of Nain who witnessed this miracle, we want to tell others of what Christ Jesus has done. And unlike those people, we know full well who it is who speaks His word of life to us—the Son of God born of Mary, crucified and risen for us. Our worship and our service for the church and our work to spread the Word of His salvation are fueled by the glorious truths which are illustrated for us here.

May the Holy Spirit grant this to us for Jesus sake. Amen.