

Come Lord Jesus Come : 1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17

We are all familiar with the statement 'familiarity breeds contempt'. An expression along the same line is 'familiarity tends to dull the senses'. We experience this ourselves. Cities, places can lose the magic they held. People easily taken for granted. We can even take God for granted, and certainly we can take Scripture for granted. There are those times, we can all agree, when a reading comes up in our quiet time or here on a Sunday morning and we can easily slip into thinking with a groan "Not this one again". When this happens it is very easy to miss what is being said to us. Such could happen with the readings from Cliff.

We are familiar with them- especially Elijah and the Widow. We have an understanding of both - more or less and we could easily say - well, they are about two healings and consequently show the power of God. And yes, they do, but, when we let familiarity lead us, we are missing a very important connection with this Elijah and Jesus coupling as shown in this Lucan account of Jesus and a widow in Nain.

This story is found only in Luke and follows a previous mention of the widow and Elijah in Chapter 4 when Jesus had shared his Mission Manifesto from Isaiah ... again familiar words. With all eyes fixed upon him Jesus then said: Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. But then those in the synagogue started to mutter and probably scratch their beards and heads: 'But isn't this Joseph's son?'

To which Jesus replied "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath in the region of Sidon to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. Luke then tells us the people hearing these words marched Jesus out to the brow of the hill ready to throw him over.

As we come now to Luke 7 - the people are startled into again making a response to this man from Nazareth. But this time the response is different. Why? Because Luke does something very significant; Jesus is placed front and centre in the thinking of the disciples and the people through the use of this connection with Elijah. Remember the Gospels are written in hindsight. What is to happen, is already known, experienced and discussed. Luke is making a point to his readers: "As I write, I am revealing to you whom Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Lord, is ... read it and understand".

So Luke connects Jesus with Elijah: Elijah was a great prophet within Judaism and his deeds became legendary. His stories were told and re told and read about in Temple and the synagogues. What has Elijah to do with Jesus?

This is quite an interesting and detailed story with Jesus interrupting the start of a funeral procession to bring the deceased back to life. It isn't hard to picture the scene: the distraught mother weeping and wailing supported by weeping friends on either side and then the trail of mourners and the crowd. Imagine the confusion and unease as this stranger, Jesus, approaches the bier, more a wicker basket than a contemporary coffin. Jesus tells the mother not to cry. Imagine the shock and sheer incredulity of the crowd as the boy sits up in his bier and talks. Awe and shock fills the crowd.

Now what do we make of this? Biblical commentators are open with regard to the action of Jesus. Perhaps Jesus did bring the boy back from the dead. Or perhaps the boy wasn't dead in the first place, merely in a coma. Even my favourite commentator, William Barclay, writes that maybe he was saved from being buried alive as many in Palestine were in those times. And we know too this happened in Victorian England when little bells were attached to the toes of the dead to be rung as they jerked awake. A guard was placed at the cemetery for such an event - which did happen by the way.

In this discussion on such a theological and emotive subject, there will never be an answer to satisfy everyone. But what is important for us as we ponder this for our lives as 21st century disciples: to

those people who saw it happen, there was no doubt - Jesus had brought the widow's son back to life. An astonishing and incredible thing to witness and no wonder they were 'filled with awe'.

But this was not what really got the crowd going. Verse 16 says: they glorified God saying "A great prophet has risen up among us and God has visited his people". What they had witnessed reminded them of the prophet Elijah. The people make the connection with Elijah and how different is this occasion to when the crowds manhandled Jesus in the synagogue and marched him out because of his references to Elijah and Elisha.

Now the similarities between these two healings are clear: a widow's only son, a premature death, distraught mother, restoration of life by a holy man. Same circumstances, same outcome.

Jesus' miracle, which looks at first glance like a spontaneous act of compassion towards a grieving mother, was at the same time the spitting image of Elijah's miracle. The original Greek phrase at the end of the story, in which Jesus 'gave him back to his mother' is identical with the phrase used by Elijah after his healing. No wonder the crowds were astonished. Raised on the Jewish scriptures, taught to revere Elijah as the greatest of prophets, everyone who saw or heard about Jesus and the widow of Nain would make the Elijah connection. No wonder the word spread around the countryside.

Was Jesus acting out a 'sign' in public, then what was the message of the sign? What was he trying to convey by drawing this parallel with Elijah? What was the message of Luke as he wrote this Gospel.

Let us return to Luke 4 when Jesus makes his appearance in the Synagogue in his home city of Nazareth to declare his Mission by reading from the words of Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has appointed me to preach the good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Here in Nain, on this day, at this funeral procession, in front of a large crowd, Jesus again fulfils these words. This is who Jesus is. Jesus is filled with compassion for the widow. A widow left in a man's world without her son is a vivid picture of destitution. Her future grim. In restoring her son, the woman is restored to society. As one who identifies with and has compassion for a marginalised person, Jesus acts to remedy her situation. But this is too a resurrection that proclaims the future. It foreshadows the raising of Jesus himself as we are told by the Gospel writers.

In Jesus, God has looked favourably upon his people. In Jesus, God is revealed; salvation history is played out.

For Luke, this is who Jesus of Nazareth is. The following verses after this episode in Nain have the disciples of John the Baptist reporting back to him concerning all the stories that are now circulating about this Jesus of Nazareth, the one John had baptised in the Jordan River. John sends two of his disciples to ask of Jesus: Are you the coming one or do we look for another?

Jesus replies: "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: That the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of me".

And what does this mean for us today:

Come, Lord Jesus, come

Let the day come, Lord

When our world's misery will find your mercy. Let the day come when our poverty will find your riches.

Let the day come when our path will find the way to your house.

Let the day come when our tears will find your smile.

Let the day come when our joy will find your heaven.

Let the day come when your church fill find the kingdom.

May You be blest, Father, for that day when our eyes will find your face. Throughout all the time of our lives you have not ceased to come before us in your Son Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our brother. Come, Lord Jesus Come! Amen Lucien Deiss, 20th century French catholic liturgist.

