

Pentecost 3 – 5th June 16

Readings: 1 Kings 17: 8-16(17-24); Psalm 146; Galatians 1: 11-24; Luke 7: 11-17

There is an added dimension to grief when a child dies before the parents. I'm acutely aware of this from my pastoral experience. Some of you may be aware of it from personal experience. It is poignant, sad and unutterably tragic when a child is still-born. But even when the child is an adult, there is still the same added dimension. There are all sorts of questions raised many of which often have no readily apparent answer. It's against the expected or perceived natural order of things for a child to die before parents. It seems unfair – and it often is. Often one hears such feelings expressed along the lines of "It shouldn't have been her or him, why can't it have been me." I think there's often an element of guilt there as well – commonly known as survivor guilt. Both the first reading and the Gospel have accounts of the death of a child – in both cases the son of a widow. And without wishing to downplay the extent of grief in the stories, as so often in the scriptures, both deaths are vehicles for something else.

To put the reading from 1 Kings in some context, Chapter 17 of 1 Kings begins the story about the prophet Elijah who becomes one of the prophetic giants. Elijah has stood up against King Ahab, who 1 Kings records "did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him."¹ Elijah is told by God to go and hide in a Wadi east of the Jordan River.² It is here that he receives the "word of the Lord" to move to Zarephath. Now this is a considerable journey - from the east of the Jordan River to the Phoenecian coast of the Mediterranean Sea to the south of Tyre where Zarephath was located. And it wasn't an easy area to go into – it was then the heartland of the Baal cult with which Ahab was associated and against which Elijah would battle for almost all his ministry. So understandably, when he arrives he is probably physically exhausted and also very apprehensive of what awaits him. You might think he's a bit overbearing at first. He virtually demands food, but that's not the real point of the story. Through the agency of the widow, God generously provides for Elijah – even though she has little food herself, she is willing to share it with Elijah. Widows had no means of economic support, and if they were not sustained by the King or by a religious community, they were quickly reduced to poverty. They were amongst the most poor and vulnerable of the community – yet it is through such a one that God chooses to demonstrate his care for and sustenance of Elijah. And in sharing with a generosity of spirit, the widow herself finds that she is blessed and drawn into the compassion and generous provision of God.

The story in 1 Kings continues with a tragedy for the widow – her son becomes so seriously ill that there is "no breath in him"³ We're not told in as many words that the boy dies; certainly his mother thinks he has, but Elijah takes the child and revives him and restores him to his mother who exclaims "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."⁴ Elijah is able to mediate divine power, including God's power over life and death. Her exclamation is an affirmation of her gratitude (to both Elijah and God) for what has happened, it also speaks to her own

¹ 1 Kings 16:30

² 1 Kings 17:3

³ 1 Kings 17:17

⁴ 1 Kings 17:24

journey of faith from honest bitterness over her plight (leave me alone to die) at the outset of the passage to an experience of the Divine in her life.

Luke's story this morning is a clear parallel, and I think the author does this intentionally. Nain was a small, probably non-descript village near Nazareth. Again the story involves a widow, and her only son who has died. As with First Kings, this story is about transformation of human grief into joy. The author of Luke pivots the story around the observation that Jesus "had compassion for her."

Compassion means (from its Latin roots) to "suffer with" others. So to put ourselves into other peoples' situation from an empathetic and intentional mindfulness can be a door to open the way for new things to take place. Compassion is much more than feeling sorry for someone. The Greek word used in the Gospels for compassion means literally being moved in the guts. It's an incredibly strong word. When we understand human suffering for what it is, and consequently place ourselves in real solidarity with those who are suffering, we pave the road toward being a prophetic presence in the world, following the example of Jesus (who was named as "a great prophet" by those who witnessed what he did for the widow).

We can learn from the ways that Jesus placed himself in solidarity with the widow's suffering . First, he was aware of her vulnerability. In his cultural context, the most vulnerable people were women who had no male relative to care for them. Her weeping would have been only in part out of grief for the loss of her son, but it was also for the stark reality which faced her in a society in which the only way for a woman to make a living for herself was through begging and/or prostitution. Jesus further placed himself into solidarity with this woman by physically touching the funeral bier on which the dead man had been placed. Again, looking at the cultural context, to touch a dead person or to carry a corpse would place someone into an "unclean" status for religious purposes -- that individual would not be considered part of the community until after a specified time of purification had passed. Jesus was willing to put himself into the circle of those who would be treated as outcasts for having ministered to the needs of a family who had experienced death.

Jesus works with God to bring about transformation. The dead son's life was restored to him, and then he was restored to his mother. The restoration of life to this man was about more than his ability to "live and move and have his being" once again; the story is also about the restoration of the woman's place in society. Whether the man coming back to life was literal or metaphoric, it isn't just his resuscitation which was deemed prophetic; it was also the fact that a vulnerable woman was once again secure in her ability to live into her old age cared for by someone. In that cultural context -- following a long trajectory from the ancient Torah – the Law where, for example in the Book of Deuteronomy widows are specifically provided for⁵ and Prophets –and we've heard the story of Elijah this morning - providing for vulnerable people like widows and orphans was an expected part of living a faithful life.

The fact that this widow's vulnerability would relegate her to degrading acts of begging or worse in order to eke out a living was a symptom of a culture which had rejected the spiritual principles at its core. Jesus' actions of solidarity helped to restore not only the widow to her rightful state of security, but the members of the society who surrounded her, represented by the large crowd, were reminded

⁵ Deuteronomy 24:17 and 24: 20 for example

of their role in providing for those who are most vulnerable among them. It's no small wonder that Jesus was proclaimed "a great prophet" by the crowd -- prophets comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.

Turning to our society, we could well reflect whether we have lost the spiritual principles at our core. Is this why we often hear talk of "compassion fatigue". We could reflect on these questions - Who are the ones among us who have been rendered voiceless or vulnerable? Who are those whose life conditions put them at risk through no fault of their own? How are we called to compassion in our context. How might we place ourselves in solidarity with those who are suffering? What risks might we take in order to be in solidarity with them; and to what degree are we willing to take those risks? How can we work to restore the marginalized to the safe, caring centre of the community? How might we be a prophetic presence in our society, calling it to embody compassion?

It is rare that a day will go by without some opportunity to place ourselves in someone else's shoes through the spiritual practice of compassion – we can do that in our prayers. The Collect of the Day provided for this week in The Book of Common Prayer puts this in very straightforward language:

...Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right,

and by your merciful guiding may do them...

We may not be called on in our daily living to resuscitate someone from death or life-threatening conditions – but through our actions dying spirits can certainly be revived. Healing is grounded in compassion – a heart-felt and visceral solidarity with those whose life circumstances have met with grief, economic distress and sometimes unimaginable tragedy. To pray for the discernment to see things that way, and to act accordingly, is at the centre of embodying compassion, a value, along with that of humility I might say, much of our society seems sadly to have lost.⁶

⁶ The part of the sermon dealing with the Gospel draws on reflections by The Rev. David Grant Smith, Rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Penn Yan, NY. at www.processandfaith.org