

***RAISING THE SON OF THE WIDOW OF NAIN
ON RECONCILIATION***

**October 7, 2018
3rd Sunday of Luke
Revision F**

Gospel: Luke 7:11-16

Today’s Gospel lesson is used in the West at about this same time of year for the 26th Sunday after Trinity or sometimes for the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost.

Whereas many of the accounts of events in Jesus’ life are recorded in several, if not all four, of the Gospel accounts, today’s lesson is recorded only by Luke. The setting for this event is early in the second year of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus had just finished the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5:1-7:29) and the “Sermon on the Plain” (so called from Luke 6:17) shortly thereafter (Luke 6:17-49). The Twelve Apostles have been selected by Jesus, (Luke 6:12-16) but have not yet been sent out two-by-two to heal the sick and cast out demons (Luke 9:1-6). John the Baptist had been imprisoned (Luke 7:18-23) but not yet beheaded by Herod (Luke 9:7-9). Shortly after this Gospel account, John the Baptist’s disciples came to Jesus and asked if He was the One to come or if they should look for another. Jesus replied that they should look around, for the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. Today’s Gospel lesson was the illustration He gave them for the dead being raised.

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Following the “Sermon on the Plain,” Jesus went to Capernaum, which is at the Northern end of the Sea of Galilee (Luke 7:1). There He healed the centurion’s servant without ever seeing or touching the servant. Because of the centurion’s faith, Jesus remarked, “I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!” (Luke 7:9). The next day, Jesus went to the city of Nain (Luke 7:11) which is about 20 miles distant as the crow flies and is about 5 miles Southeast of His hometown of Nazareth. This was a good day’s journey, since it meant crossing the mountain range near Mt. Tabor (1800 feet elevation).

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Differences Between the Raising of the Widow's Son and Lazarus

As Jesus arrived outside Nain, accompanied by a large crowd, He encountered a funeral procession coming out of the city. Carried in an open coffin in the procession was the body of the only son of a widow. The funeral procession also had a large crowd, and the widow was openly weeping.

From the events described in Luke, it appears that the widow of Nain was not well off financially. First, the dead man was being carried in an open coffin (Luke 7:14). Secondly, when Jesus spoke to him, "Young man, I say to you, arise" (Luke 7:14), he sat up and began to speak immediately. There was no need to "unbind him" as was necessary for Lazarus when he was raised (John 11:44). This is because Lazarus and the Lord Himself were given a rich man's burial. For example, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea bound Jesus' body with strips of linen mixed with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes, creating a mummy or cocoon (John 19:39-40). This is why Peter and John believed He was risen as soon as they saw the burial clothes; the mummy was empty and undisturbed; Jesus rose right through the burial wrappings.

For the son of the widow of Nain, there were no burial wrappings like Lazarus or Jesus. He was being carried to a pauper's grave. These circumstances put the widow in very difficult financial straits. Under Mosaic Law, no special provisions were made for widows (except for a share of the triennial third tithe) because the oldest son – who had the birthright or extra share of the property – had the duty to provide for her. This is why Jesus asked His second cousin John to care for His mother just before He died (John 19:26-27). In addition, the Scribes and Pharisees of that day were well known to foreclose on widows' houses when the poverty-stricken widows ran out of money (Matthew 23:14).

Jesus Shows Compassion

Of the three people Jesus is recorded as raising from the dead: Lazarus (John 11:38-45), Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43) and the widow's son, in each case there is implied a considerable amount of compassion of Jesus toward the bereaved. In Lazarus' case, Jesus, Himself, wept (John 11:35). In Jairus' case, Jairus "begged Jesus earnestly, saying 'My little daughter lies at the point of death. Come lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live'" (Mark 5:23). However, she died before Jesus arrived. In the case of the widow's son, Jesus came to the funeral procession uninvited, for "He had compassion on her" (Luke 7:15).

The above three cases represent three different stages of death. Jairus' daughter had just died and was still lying on her bed (Mark 5:40). The widow's son had died recently and was being carried to his grave (Luke 7:12). Lazarus had been dead four days and was beginning to decompose (John 11:39).

When the Lord saw the widow, He had compassion on her, raised her son from the dead and presented him to his mother. The response of both large crowds was one of being seized with fear glorifying God and saying, "A great prophet has risen up among us," and "God has visited His people" (Luke 7:16). Word of this event spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding neighborhood, including Nazareth (Luke 7:17).

Gregory of Nyssa wrote¹ about how difficult the death of her son was for the widow of Nain. Her son was just at the age of marriage, where he would take care of her in her old age, along with her grandchildren. Now she has no one to do that. She was prolonging her lament over him, lengthening her mourning, filling up her sorrow. And then Jesus came over unexpectedly!

“The Scripture tells us of a city called Nain in Judaea: a widow there had an only child, no longer a child in the sense of being among boys, but already passing from childhood to man’s estate; the narrative calls him ‘a young man’. The story conveys much in few words: the very recital is a real lamentation: the dead man’s mother, it says, ‘was a widow’. Notice the weight of her misfortune, how the text briefly sets out the tragedy of her suffering! What does the phrase mean? That she had no more hope of bearing sons, to cure the loss she had just sustained in him who had departed; for the woman was a widow. She had not in her power to look to another instead of to him who was gone; for he was her only child; and how great a grief is here expressed anyone may easily see who understands natural feelings. Him alone she had known in travail; him alone she had nursed at her breast; he alone made her table cheerful, he alone was the cause of brightness in her home, in play, in work, in learning, in gaiety, at processions, at sports, at gatherings of youth. He alone was all that is sweet and precious in a mother’s eyes. Now at the age of marriage, he was the stock of her race, the shoot of its succession, the staff of her old age. Moreover, even the additional detail of his time of life is another lament. He who speaks of him as ‘a young man’ tells of the flower of his faded beauty, speaks of him as just covering his face with down, not yet with a full thick beard, but still bright with the beauty of his cheeks. What then, were his mother’s sorrows for him? How would her heart be consumed as it were with a flame; how bitterly would she prolong her lament over him, embracing the corpse as it lay before her, lengthening out her mourning for him as far as possible, so as not to hasten the funeral of the dead, but to have her fill of sorrow! The narrative does not pass this by; for Jesus ‘when He saw her’, it says, ‘had compassion’. ‘Jesus came and touched the bier; and they that bore him stood still’; and He said to the dead, ‘Young man, I say unto thee, arise’. ‘and He delivered him to his mother alive’ (Luke 7:12-15). Notice that no short time had intervened since the dead man had entered upon that state, he was all but laid in the tomb; the miracle wrought by the Lord is greater than that for Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:22-43), since the widow’s son had been dead longer, though the command is the same.”

Ambrose of Milan pointed out² how God is moved by our tears and the weeping of the saints draws the mercy of God to them. This happened for the widow of Nain, Peter for Dorcas and Peter after his denial. By mourning over our sins, we shut the door against fresh ones.

“Let the Church, our Mother, weep for you, and wash away your guilt with her tears; let Christ see you mourning and say, ‘Blessed *are* those who mourn, for they shall be comforted’ (Matthew 5:4). It pleases Him that many should entreat for one. In the Gospel, too, moved by the widow’s tears, because

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man, Philosophical Works, III, xxv, 10.

² Ambrose of Milan, Two Books Concerning Repentance, II, x, 92.

many were weeping for her, He raised her son. He heard Peter more quickly when He raised Dorcas, because the poor were mourning over the death of the woman (Acts 9:39). He also forthwith forgave Peter, for he wept most bitterly (Luke 22:62). And if you weep bitterly Christ will look upon you and your guilt shall leave you. For the application of pain does away with the enjoyment of the wickedness and the delight of the sin. And so, while mourning over our past sins we shut the door against fresh ones, and from the condemnation of our guilt there arises as it were a training in innocence.”

Ephraim the Syrian concurred³ and said, “If I thus suffer for the departure of him, the youth who was restored to life, blessed is He Who had compassion on the widow; in her only son He gave peace to her dwelling that had been made desolate.

This account in Luke is very similar to one that occurred during the life of the prophet Elijah. Elijah had prophesied that there would be no rain for 3 ½ years (1 Kings 17:1, 18:1, Luke 4:25). During most of that period, he lived in Zarephath (just south of Sidon) in an upper room at the house of a widow who had one young child (1 Kings 17:9-10). The widow was expecting to starve to death due to the famine (1 Kings 17:12), but Elijah saw to it that the jar of flour and the jar of oil never ran out (1 Kings 17:16). Near the end of the 3 ½ years, the widow’s son died, and Elijah raised him from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24). According to tradition⁴, the widow’s son was Jonah the prophet, whose three days in the belly of the sea monster prophesied about the Lord’s death and resurrection.

Jesus Purpose in Nain: Light versus Darkness

With this background in mind, it was no accident that Jesus went to Nain at this time. A few months earlier, He quoted the above account about Elijah to people in the synagogue of Nazareth (5 miles away) in response to their unbelief (Luke 4:24-26). This made them so angry that they tried to throw Him off a cliff (Luke 4:28-30). They had wanted him to do in Nazareth what He had done in Capernaum (Luke 4:23), but Jesus said that “no prophet is accepted in His own country” (Luke 4:24), and He could do few miracles there (Mark 6:1-6). The response of the people of Nain was quite the opposite. This is a very interesting comparison. Even the Son of God can be limited in His performing of miracles depending on the faith of the people present. Why? In His mercy, He is reluctant to bring increasing judgment on them for rejecting Him.

Comparing Nain with Nazareth is a study in light versus darkness. John Chrysostom calls⁵ death and error, darkness:

“For the light which our physical eyes see does not shine in darkness but apart from it; but the preaching of Christ has shown forth in the midst of prevailing error, and made it disappear. And He, by enduring death, has so overcome death that He has restored those already held by it”.

³ Ephraim the Syrian, *Nisibene Hymns*, 37, 7.

⁴ Nickolai Velimirovic, *The Prologue from Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, September 22. <https://oca.org/saints/lives/2018/09/22>.

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, V, 3

Nazareth's response to One who had grown up in their midst was to try to throw Him off a cliff; that's darkness trying to overcome the Light. Nain's response was to receive Him as a great prophet; that's darkness disappearing when the Light arrives.

Theophylact of Ochrid stated⁶ that one can make an analogy between the widow and our soul, the dead son and our mind, the body of the dead son and a tomb. The mind, which is dead, is being carried outside the heavenly Jerusalem; but Christ's touch raises him from the tomb of sin.

“You may also understand the widow to mean the soul, which has suffered the loss of its husband, the Word of God, which sows the good seed. The son of such a widow is the mind, which is dead and is being carried outside the city; that is outside the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the land of the living. The Lord then takes pity and touches the bier. The bier which carries the dead body. The body is like a tomb. Having touched the body, the Lord then raises the mind, restoring its youth and vigor. After the young man, meaning the mind, has sat up, raised from the tomb of sin, he will begin to speak, that is, to teach other. For while he is in the grip of sin, he cannot speak or teach: who would believe him?”

Implications for the Future Resurrection

Irenaeus of Lyons stated⁷ that the raising of the widow's son and Lazarus demonstrates for us the coming resurrection at the Last Day. They both rose in the same body that had died. The Lord prefigures eternal things by temporal things; He is able to extend life to His handiwork; this shows that His words concerning its future resurrection may also be believed.

“The deceased daughter of the synagogue ruler; the widow's dead son, who was being carried out to burial near the gate of the city; and Lazarus, who had lain four days in the tomb — in what bodies did they rise again? In those same, no doubt, in which they had also died. For if it were not in the very same, then certainly those same individuals who had died did not rise again. For Luke says, ‘Then Jesus 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’ (Luke 7:14-15). Jesus called Lazarus ‘with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go”’ (John 11:43-44). This was symbolical of that man who had been bound in sins. Therefore, the Lord said, ‘Loose him, and let him go’. Therefore, those who were healed were made whole in those members which had in times past been afflicted. The dead rose in the identical bodies, their limbs and bodies receiving health; they were given that life which was granted by the Lord, who prefigures eternal things by temporal things. He shows that it is He who is Himself able to extend both healing and life to His handiwork, that His words concerning its future

⁶ Theophylact of Ochrid, Explanation of the Gospel of Luke, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, Mo, 1997, p. 74.

⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, V, xiii, 1.

resurrection may also be believed. So also at the end, when the Lord utters His voice 'by the last trumpet' (1 Corinthians 15:52), the dead shall be raised, as He Himself declares: 'The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth -- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation'" (John 5:28-29).

Cyril of Alexandria stated⁸ that the three people that Christ raised from the dead: the widow's son, Jairus' daughter and Lazarus, are a pledge of the hope prepared for us of a resurrection of the dead.

"The prophets proclaimed the truth of the Resurrection before. 'Your dead shall live; *together with* my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; for your dew *is like* the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead' (Isaiah 26:19). By dew, he means the life-giving operation of Christ, which is by the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit. David bears witness, thus speaking concerning them in words addressed to God, the savior of us all. 'You hide Your face, they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth' (Psalm 104:29-30). It was by reason of Adam's transgression of the commandment that we, having our faces turned away from God, returned to our dust. For the sentence God upon human nature was, 'Dust you *are*, and to dust you shall return' (Genesis 3:19). But at the time of the consummation of this world, the face of the earth shall be renewed; for God the Father by the Son in the Spirit will give life to all those who are laid within it.

One might note that there is a difference between resuscitation and resurrection. The widow's son in Nain was resuscitated; eventually he would die again. The same is true of other recorded cases in the Scripture: Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:41-56), Lazarus (John 11:38-46), many saints at Jesus' crucifixion (Matthew 27:51), Tabitha raised by Peter (Acts 9:36), Jonah raised by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24) and even the dead man who touched Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:20-21).

The resurrection of the Son of God was different from all these. He rose, never to die again (Romans 6:9). His appearance in His resurrected body looked different in some way, yet He was still recognizable (John 21:12). His body was still flesh and bones, and He ate food in their presence (Luke 24:39-43). Yet His resurrected body passed through solid walls and appeared to His disciples when they were huddled behind locked doors (John 20:19).

Those who are raised by the Son of God at the Second Coming will be like Him. There will be a transfiguration where "the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43, Daniel 12:3). These will never die again either "but have passed from death to life" (John 5:24). May we all be found worthy of this resurrection and thus avoid the second death (Revelation 20:14).

⁸ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 154.

Cyril of Alexandria concluded⁹ by saying that while death has brought corruption and old age to men, Christ will renew everything at the Second Coming.

“It is death that has brought men to old age and corruption. Death therefore, has made old, that is to say, corrupted; for ‘what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away’ (Hebrews 8:13). But Christ renews, in that He is the Life. For He Who in the beginning created, is able again to renew unto incorruption and life. For one may well affirm that it is the office of one and the same energy and power, to effect both the one and the other. Therefore, as Isaiah says, ‘Death has prevailed and swallowed *men* up; but again, the Lord God has taken away every tear from every face. He has taken away the reproach of *his* people from all the earth: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it’ (Isaiah 25:8). By the ‘reproach of the people’, he means sin, which disgraces and depraves men. Together with destruction, sin shall be slain, and sorrow and death shall perish, and the tears shall cease, which are shed on its account.”

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 154.