

The way of life meets the way of death

10th Sunday of Ordinary Time

1 Kings 17:17–24

Psalm 30:2, 4–6, 11–13

Galatians 1:11–19

Luke 7:11–17

Any daily media source recounts tragic story after story of premature deaths, fractured relationships, and broken dreams. Indeed, we need not turn to media outlets for an accounting of the world's troubles and sorrows. We have only to look at our own friends and neighbors and families. We have only to look into our own lives and hearts. Jesus, the healer and power-giver, never insulted people by telling them their problems weren't real. He never told the sick they were never really sick or that their illness had no pain or reality. He never told people that death wasn't real, nor did he offer the widowed mother in today's Gospel Pollyannaish pabulum to soothe her grieving heart.

We all know that trouble and tragedy are real. Evil and death are real. Are you out of a job? Did your home decline in value? Are your financial resources dwindling? Do you have a serious illness? Is your marriage not right? Is there a real problem with your children? Are you enslaved in a debilitating habit? Then don't deny it, says Jesus.

Today's Gospel reading is a case in point. There is no denial of the reality of the anguish presented in this scene.

What this story wants to help us identify is that in a world where pain is real, Jesus wants to meet us in that place of deepest sorrow. At the point of life's most debilitating and seemingly life defying experiences this encounter between Jesus and the widow of Nain brings into focus a vitally important question.

What happens when the way of life meets the way of death? What happens when the Good News of the Gospel meets the bad news of the world?

Notice please that in this story there are two processions. One going into Nain and headed up by Jesus, the Lord of Life; the other going out of Nain and headed up by death. The two processions are on a collision course. Can't you just see it?! This kinds of reminds me of two freight trains hurtling towards each other on the same track. Or, it reminds me of two opposing armies charging towards each other. You know something has to give.

We all know that death is certain and death is immovable. When the young man entered death, it was his final step. When death takes hold of a person, there is no return, no going back, no appeal, no argument. Death is the end and it has the last word. And in our Scripture passage we

see that it has spoken on the life of the only son of a widow in No-where-ville, a town called Nain.

However, coming into that backwater to meet the procession headed by death is the procession headed by Jesus. Jesus also came to have the last word. Jesus is life Himself and He came that people should have life and have it to the full.

What will happen when these two processions meet at the town gate of Nain? Will it be the procession headed by Jesus or will it be the procession headed by the coffin and the corpse that gives way?

We discover that indeed it is the procession headed by the coffin that gives way because Jesus is willing to enter into the depth of suffering that accompanies death and then is able to speak the word that confronts death and stops it dead in its tracks.

Listen to this verse again that helps us to understand just how fully Jesus was willing to enter into the suffering accompanying death.

When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her.

This word compassion is one replete with visceral feeling. The word really means that “Jesus was moved in his bowels”. It is a word that presents Jesus as entering into the depth of the sorrow surrounding the scene he saw before him. He literally felt the widow’s grief. The sorrow he witnessed mattered profoundly and intensely to the point that it caused Jesus intestinal discomfort. There is a vivid verse from the Old Testament book of the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* that captures the anguish implied by the word “compassion”.

***See, O Lord, how distressed I am;
my stomach churns,
my heart is wrung within me,
because in the street the sword bereaves;
in the house it is like death.
(Lamentations 1:20)***

There is nothing that causes stomach churning and heart wrenching anguish like death, especially the death of the young.

But the story does not end there. Jesus goes on to then give two direct statements. One to the woman.

“Do not grieve”

And one to the dead man.

“Young man, I say to you, rise!”

Now in this story we know that the young man did indeed arise. But we know that this is not the norm. The Catechism speaks to this when in paragraph 1505 we read:

Jesus did not heal all the sick. His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover. (CCC 1505)

This gets to the heart of the matter. In this case the woman’s sorrow did immediately give way to joy and her tears were wiped away because her son’s voice was the next she heard after Jesus’. But for us we don’t live with that kind of immediate experience of the victory of life over death.

So what can we take from this story? If we had been there we would have seen with our physical eyes the raising of the dead man. Yet today it is with the eyes of faith that we need to look at a story like this and affirm afresh: Because of Jesus’ word, death does not have the last word.

For those who have faith we can echo these words of St. Augustine:

It is a greater miracle to raise again one who is to live forever, than to raise one who must die again.

Because people of faith have this perspective we understand that grief has a context and will never have the last word because death does not have the last word. This means that as Christians we grieve and grieve deeply. But our grief is hopeful because when those two processions met, one going into Nain and one going out, when the way of life met the way of death, life was victorious.

This passage is so timely in light of the tragedy that happened in Tuscany a week ago Thursday. As you have undoubtedly heard, around the supper hour on May 26th 7 year-old Sloane Marie Viczko was accidentally struck as her father drove out of the family’s northwest Calgary driveway. Here is a story of such tragic dimensions but one where life met death head on and is so reminiscent of today’s Gospel.

Talk about compassion. The response of the community to this family has been overwhelming. Throughout Tuscany there are teal ribbons expressing the neighbour’s solidarity with the Viczko’s. Teal was Sloane’s favorite colour. As of this morning, in the past seven days, through Go Fund Me, 961 people have donated over \$110,000 to support Jason, who is self-employed, his wife Shannon their children.

And in the midst of death there is the message of life. Because Jesus defeated death those grieving Sloane's death are hope-filled. The Viczko's a devout Catholics. Here was the statement from the family after Sloane's death:

"Our beloved and most exquisite daughter Sloane Marie Viczko passed this morning in her mother's and father's arms to an army of angels wings.

Added to this was Sloane's decision to donate her organs. This is something she had discussed with her mom Shannon before the accident. So like Jesus himself, Sloane's death will allow others to live.

Nothing can take away from the anguish and sorrow that this story contains. But when seen in the light of the other story from the town of Nain, when the procession of life meets the procession of death Jesus' words "I say to you get up" were heard by Sloane as she began her journey towards heaven.

It is because Jesus went to Nain and spoke the words he did to that sorrowful family that we can take Paul's words to heart:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

(1 Thes. 4:13-14)

The reason we believe this is because in time Jesus raised a young man from Nain. The reason we believe this is because in time the Lord of Life defeated the Lord of Death by rising from the death.

Those two processions are always on a collision course and although it might seem that death wins, this is not so. Because of Jesus, the sting of death gives way to the healing balm of the Resurrection.

So grieve we must in a world like this. But such grief when coupled with compassion and hope allows life to win every time.

