

**Pentecost 3**  
**9/6/2013**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**1 Kings 17:8-24**  
**Psalm 146**  
**Galatians 1:11-24**  
**Luke 7:11-17**

---

Picture the scene of today's gospel story.

Approaching the city gate of Nain from outside is Jesus, accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd. Simultaneously, approaching the same gate from the inside is a dead young man, accompanied by his widowed mother and a large crowd. In the confined space of the gate, the two crowds meet.

The woman, we imagine, is distraught, faced not only with the relentless pain of grief at the loss of her only son, but very likely also the prospect of destitution with no male to support her. The crowd grieves with and for her, weeping and wailing as custom demands. The dead son is carried outside the city, outside the place of living, out to the place of the dead for burial.

Jesus, on the other hand, is, according to Luke's telling of the story, riding on something of a wave. He has announced himself as the one on whom God's Spirit rests for the effective proclamation of freedom and justice for all. He has taught the crowds gathered on the plain. And now he has just travelled down from Capernaum where he healed the centurion's slave by word alone. The crowd travels with him, buoyed by his wisdom and power, celebrating the excitement he brings.

Then, in the gate, the funeral procession, the procession of death, comes face to face with the procession of followers of Jesus, the procession of life. And Jesus is filled with compassion for the woman. He comforts her. He raises the dead man. He restores the now raised man to his mother. The crowd, of course, is delighted and amazed with the miraculous raising of the dead, rightly recognising it as the work of God, rightly recognising God at work in Jesus, and all that that promises. But the way Luke tells the story, the raising of the son is really only a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is Jesus' compassion for the woman that is the central highlight. He responds to her distress, he comforts her, he raises the son for the sake of the mother. Luke, it seems, would have us understand that a great prophet is to be recognised at least as much by his compassion as by his ability to do the works of God. When God looks favourably on God's people, it is above all God's compassion that makes the difference. It is the compassion of the living God, responding to the suffering imposed by death, that leads to the intervention and ultimate triumph of life over death.

Might it be fair to say, then, that the mission of Christ, with which we are entrusted, is to respond with compassion in the face of death, and speak words of life.

Of course I am not talking here about being incredibly insensitive and hurtful to people in mourning, as if the pain of the loss of loved ones counts for nothing in view of the assumed destination of the beloved. Nor am I suggesting that we treat every funeral as an opportunity to call on God to raise the physically dead.

The sort of deadness we are talking about is the deadness of having no hope. It is expressed so well by the widow in the Elijah story: 'As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.' There's a procession of death if ever there was one. And Elijah, servant of the living God, the God of life, does not dismiss her experience or belittle her plan. In fact he instructs her to follow through on it, but only after she has catered for him, according to her meagre means. Even at the point of choosing to curl up and die, the woman cannot ignore the cultural expectations regarding hospitality. She has to put death on hold in order to address the invitation from life to look beyond her own situation, and discover that, even yet, there is something to live for. The woman addresses the needs of this new found neighbour. She lives, if only for that moment, as God desires all people to live. Thus the word of life transforms the situation by realigning her perspective. Life addresses death, and death is overcome. Despite all evidence to the contrary, it transpires that what she has is enough.

The question, then, is where do we as people of the living God encounter processions of death? Where do we come face to face with people who have lost the capacity to care for another? Where do we come across people who have lost the capacity to care about themselves? Where do we come across people who are just going through the motions of life because they don't know what else to do? Where do we come across people who simply do not believe that they are deeply loved?

Or maybe it's not as dramatic as that. Maybe, if truth be told, we all have our moments of feeling like death is winning. Maybe we're good at berating ourselves for not doing better. Maybe we think if we're not getting it right death is winning anyway. We're so good in our culture at hiding all our self-doubts, putting on the happy face, getting on with the job, playing the diary game, running away from ourselves as fast as we can, protecting ourselves by exerting power over one another. We're so afraid of getting caught out, especially at church, the very place where we talk so much about being community, being real with one another, accepting others and ourselves as we are. Death lingers and lurks even as we name ourselves people of life. Imagine if we could address ourselves with the compassion of the prophets. Imagine if we were so sure of God's love for us that we felt no need to protect ourselves from anyone at church. After all, if we're good enough for God to love, who cares what anyone else thinks?

The thing is, if we are to recognise death when it confronts us in the struggles of our neighbours, and respond with compassion in order to speak a word of life, we need to be deeply in tune with life. We need to be deeply in tune with the God of life. We need to know what it is to be recipients of the compassion of God. We need to know ourselves to be people of the God of life simply by that gracious word of life spoken to us in Jesus Christ, setting us free from all that is death dealing within us.

Then, as we go about our daily life, we will be attuned to those moments when something that is less than life presents itself. We'll have compassion at the ready. We'll dare to speak or live a word of life that offers to establish genuine human connection, real life, if only for a moment, and give a reason for hope. And that just might be enough to set in motion a procession of life, to the glory of God.

\*\*\*