

*Sunday 9 June 2013 – Third Sunday after Pentecost
i Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17*

When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her.¹

What a scene – Jesus and a large crowd approaching the gate of the town of Nain, and as they get close they realise that another large crowd is coming out – a man who has died, lying on the bier, his mother, a widow, distraught, and with her a large crowd. There would have been the professional mourners, wailing and crying, making plenty of noise so that the grief of the mother and those closest was not exposed in aching silence, but enclosed within this cacophony of sorrow and sympathy.

So what were Jesus, and the disciples and the large crowd with him to do? I imagine they drew to one side, out of respect for the man who had died and for the grief of the mourners, but also because coming into contact with a corpse, or with someone who had touched a corpse, would make them ritually unclean. So surely they would keep a healthy distance.

But “when the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her.”

When *the Lord* saw her. This is the first time Luke has used the title “Lord”/“Kurios” directly of Jesus. Others have addressed him that way, but Luke has not referred to him as Lord in his narrative. “Lord” is the translation of the unspoken Hebrew name of God - “Yahweh” - “I am who I am” - in the Hebrew Bible. The angel of the Lord came to Zechariah and to Mary; both sang to ‘the Lord God of Israel’; things were done according to the law of the Lord. So here when Luke speaks of ‘the Lord’ he is signaling the connection between Jesus and the Lord God of Israel. As the shepherds had beentold in the fields outside Bethlehem, here is “a saviour who is Messiah/Christ and Lord”.

So it as the Lord that Jesus sees this woman. The Lord sees her. God sees her. You know that women weren't often seen, certainly were not often noticed. And it's not just her gender that is against her – we are also told she had an only son – who has died – and she is a widow.

Widows and orphans were those who were the most defenceless in Jewish society. Women lived under the protection of their father's household and then their husband's household. If her husband died she was in a vulnerable position within the family structure, but there would still be a place for her through her son, who was his father's heir. But to lose him, the heir, meant that the widow lost her place in the household, all personal property reverted to the husband's family, and she was left with nothing.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there was a special concern for widows and orphans in God's heart. The prophets reflected this when they reminded the people again and again that care for orphans and widows was a mark of the justice, the right relationships God looked for among God's people. “Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”² And here Jesus the Lord sees a widow, one whose prospects for life have been so drastically diminished through the death of her son, and he has compassion for her.

Compassion – not a vaguely sympathetic “oh, isn't that terrible”, but the response to great need that comes from the very heart and guts and innermost part of a person. In Luke this deep compassion always leads to action – it's what the Samaritan felt when he saw the man lying beaten up on the roadside³, and he bandaged his wounds and put him on his donkey and took him to the inn; it's what the father felt when he saw his lost son in the distance returning home⁴, and he ran to meet him and to restore him to the family. When Jesus, the Lord, saw her, he had compassion for her, for her great need, for her heart-breaking loss, for her desperate plight, and he acted.

He stepped up to the bier on which the corpse lay, and touched it. No wonder the men carrying it stopped. This never happened – Jesus had just deliberately made himself unclean.

And then he addressed the dead man – “Young man, I say to you, rise”

And the dead man did – he sat up and started talking.

And Jesus gave him back to his mother.

You've heard the parallels between today's two stories, I'm sure. Elijah came to Zarephath and met a widow near the entrance: Jesus was approaching Nain when he met the funeral procession and the widow. Elijah restored the dead son to life, as did Jesus. Elijah gave the boy to his mother – and Jesus gave the young man back to his mother. But where Elijah prayed earnestly and then applied what almost sounds like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the boy, Jesus, the Lord, simply said the word and the dead man sat up. The word of the Lord is powerful, the word of the Lord brings life. And life

1 Luke 7:13

2 Isaiah 1:17

3 Luke 10:33

4 Luke 15:20

is restored, not just to the young man who had died, but also to his mother, the woman who had been seen. When Jesus gave her son back to her, he was also restoring to her life and hope and status and dignity within her community.

The crowd who witnessed all this knew what they had seen – God has looked favourably on his people – or - God has visited his people. If we want to know how God works, look at how Jesus works. He looks and sees people, especially the people that others overlook. He has compassion, feeling deep within him the need and the hurt of another. Out of that compassion he acts, bringing life and wholeness and welcome

There is the difficult question, though, the hard question. Why isn't it always like this? Jesus restored this young man to life – but what about all the others? Jesus gave new life, new hope to this widow, but what about all the others? And what about the times when we have longed to have this kind of response from God, a miracle of healing, new life, restoration, and it hasn't happened. Not like this.

There is no answer to that question. Not a neat pat easy-to-live-with answer. But part of the answer, I believe, is in the 'now and not yet' of the coming reign of God, which has begun in Jesus but which is not yet fulfilled. In Jesus, the reign of God has broken into this broken world, and the process of healing and restoration has begun. Jesus' miracles were 'signs', as John said, or foretastes of things to come, or down payments on what it will be like when the reign of God is fully present. Then there will be no more death nor sorrow nor crying nor pain – for now, in stories like this we catch a glimpse of what that will look like. Here the future age, the *eschaton*, is breaking into the present age.

And another part of the answer is to see the ways in which God continues to be at work, bringing healing and restoration, in us and through us. Remember - When the Lord saw the woman he had compassion for her.

Do we see people – do we pay attention, take notice, recognising their situation, their need, their hurt?

And do we get close enough to feel for them as Jesus did, to have compassion for them, to be willing to be moved by their pain, by their need, by their circumstance? And out of that compassion to act.

Because when we are willing to pay attention to one another, to see one another, and then to feel compassion, the sort of heart and guts compassion Jesus felt, then healing can happen. It may not be supernatural, immediate healing. But healing can happen, through long term walking alongside people, through being with them on a day-in and day-out basis, through listening, caring, holding, and loving. Healing can happen. Because God in Jesus has seen us, and had compassion for us and all people. And here at this table we remember how he acted, in love and compassion, bringing us a foretaste of the age to come, the reign of God.