

Trinity 16 (2024)

It has been said that Jesus would have made the world's worst funeral director. After all, He broke up every funeral he ever attended, included the one spoken of in today's Gospel, the funeral of the son of the widow of Nain. Two other incidences are recorded in the Gospels:

He raised Jarius' daughter. Jarius was the ruler of the synagogue at Capernaum.

And perhaps most familiar of all, he raised Lazarus of Bethany. His funeral was over by the time Jesus arrived. Not to be deterred, He went to the cemetery and had the tomb opened.

On all three occasions: "**Jesus claimed as His own what death had seized as his prey,**" to quote one Bible commentator. ///

Death is a part of the experience of life. Believers and non-believers alike walk across the stage of life, take their bow and exit on the other side.

In the words of the hymn writer, **“We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish.”**

Not a happy thought, but an accurate one.

I suppose every clergyman has been called upon to officiate at the service of a person who made little or no claim to faith.

On these occasions, about all you can do is to focus on **memories** . . . talk about the deceased person’s achievements and highlight happy moments in his or her life.

Hopefully, from these remembrances the family will gain some comfort and closure.

Memories are precious and the sharing of them is cathartic and should be encouraged whether the person who has died is a person of faith or not.

In some circles today, funerals are no longer called funerals. Instead, they are called “celebrations of life.” I suppose that title sounds less grim. Whatever such gatherings are called, almost certainly some stories will be swapped . . . some memories recounted and shared.

I am confident that this is what took place at the funeral of Nain.

Nain, after all, was a tiny, tiny, village. Everyone would have known the deceased boy and his mother. They would have watched him grow up. They would have had many stories.

But let’s go back to the beginning. There is a procession led by a grieving mother. Not only

had she lost her only son, she was a widow. A sad, sad scene.

But there is another procession as well. This one was led by Jesus and included not only His 12 disciples but a number of others as well.

At some point these two processions meet. We might call the first the **procession of death**; the second, the **procession of life**.

When such polar opposites meet almost certainly there will be a reaction, perhaps a violent one.

It would be like an Antifa crowd meeting up with a band of white-robed Ku Klux Klan members. There would likely be fireworks.

Such a reaction took place when the two processions told about in today's Gospel met, but it was a positive one instead of one of

destruction. Death gave way to life, despair to hope, crying to rejoicing.

The first words out of Jesus' mouth to this mother were "Weep not." If the only tool Jesus had had at His disposal had been **memories** . . . to point her back to the good times of the past . . . His words, weep not, would have rung pretty hollow. But that was not the case.

He reaches out and touches the brier, probably an open basket like apparatus. When He does, a lifeless corpse comes alive, sits up and speaks.

What happened that day might be viewed as a throwback to what happened *in the beginning*. At that time, God reached down and touch another piece of lifeless clay and breathed life into the first man Adam.

What does the miracle recorded in today's Gospel say about Jesus? ///

It links Him to the God of creation.

Those who witnessed this miracle would go on to cry out, “**A great prophet is risen up among us.**”

They were right up to a point . . . a prophet is One who brings God’s word to man. Jesus certainly did that, but he was more than a prophet.

He was Immanuel, God with us. Only God can give life.

But what might all this mean to you and me? After all, the tale told in today’s Gospel happened two thousand years ago. That’s a long time. What is its relevance to us in the 21st century? Does it have any?

Allow me to point you to three words which might help. All three just happen to begin with the letter ‘p’: **pity, power and promise.**

Let's begin with the first. In this story we get a glimpse of the **pity of God**. By 'pity' I mean concern or compassion.

Jesus' heart goes out to this weeping widow. Actually, the Greek is more graphic: His inward parts, His guts, were wrenched.

If Jesus indeed reveals God as no other, what does this say about God? ///

He is not some far-away, detached, stoic deity. He is a God of compassion and concern, one near at hand.

He cares about what's going on in *your* life. Put your finger on what is hurting and ask Him to reach out His hand and touch it just as Jesus did the brier on which the body of this young man was lying.

As the story moves along, we find Jesus' pity matched by His **power** . . . that's my

second ‘p’. Jesus not only feels our pain and carries our sorrows, He is able to do something about them.

Perhaps you have found yourself in a situation where you were deeply moved by something that was going on in the life of another. Perhaps this person had experienced a catastrophic loss. You wanted to help, but you felt so helpless. All you could do was to be there with that hurting soul.

Let me pause here to say: Never underestimate the power of presence. Often presence means more than words.

Even so, Jesus went beyond presence. He brought **power** to the situation.

“He speaks — and, listening to his voice, new life the dead receive”. . . says Charles Wesley’s hymn.

There is an application here for us. When Jesus shows up everything is changed.

He brings power to move beyond old destructive ways of thinking and doing . . . power to put aside crippling fear . . . power to receive and extend forgiveness . . . power to speak out for truth and justice . . . power to make a difference in the world . . . power to face both life and death.

That power is still available. Seek it. Ask for it. Receive it.

Pity, power and finally, **promise**. That is my third 'p'.

The raising of the widow of Nain's son was more than a one-off miracle. It anticipated an even greater one, the raising of Jesus Himself.

The young man spoken of in today's Gospel no less than Jairus' daughter and Lazarus of

Bethany were **resuscitated**. They were brought back to life, but all three eventually would have to die again.

No so with Jesus. His was **resurrected**. He was raised never to die again.

That, my brothers and sisters, is the life promised to each one of us, indeed to all who have been united to Him by faith and baptism.

Because He lives, we shall live also.

“But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you,” says Paul in Romans 8:11.

So, we have before us this morning a tale of something that happened a long time ago. Nevertheless, it has relevance for us today. ///

Recounting the main points, today's Gospel reminds us of the **pity of God**. You don't have to let the challenges of this life overwhelm you. You are not alone. God cares.

Secondly, it points us to the **power of God**. He not only cares but is able to bring about endurance and hope in every situation of life.

I was talking yesterday to a friend in Tampa who is caring for her husband who has Parkinson's disease. Several times a week she gets out of the house and goes to a little Cuban restaurant for coffee.

This past week she ran into someone who knew her and her situation. He came over and gave her a big hug and said, "**You always have a smile on your face. How do you do it?**"

Her response: "**I have Jesus on my shoulder.**" A lady seated nearby said, "**I see**

that too, and I am Jewish.” /// What a wonderful witness!

Finally, today's Gospel sets before us the **promise of God.**

What happened to Jesus on Easter morning will happen to everyone marked as His own. ///

In closing, the procession of life passes by this morning. It is bound for the Promised Land, the beautiful city of God. If by chance, you find yourself standing on the roadside looking on, don't stay there. Join this happy throng without delay and on to glory go!