

Trinity 16

Jesus raises the widow's son at Nain

I've never experienced Middle Eastern grief at first hand. But I expect we have all seen it on the tv news, and like African grief, it's not tidy and polite like British grief – it's a wild and noisy affair. Perhaps it would be better if we in the West expressed grief more openly, because for most of us the wailing is going on inside anyway. We just keep it buttoned up usually. And when we hear about terrible atrocities like those we recently commemorated concerning the Twin Towers, or those cowardly attacks of terrorists at the Manchester Arena, or on London Bridge, or the offices of Charlie Hebdo in France, and the re-living of the Hillsborough disaster by the relatives and friends of those who died, and, for those of us old enough to remember, the Aberfan tragedy of 1966 when a mountainous colliery spoil heap slid and submerged a school full of children and teachers, our hearts go out to all those people mourning the deaths of sons and daughters, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters and friends that they have loved deeply. And if we have a heart we cry with them.

So how would you picture the scene we just read about in Nain that day? I picture paid mourners wailing their way through the streets and a small woman clothed in black with ashes on her low-bowed head walking behind a roughly-made coffin, probably all she could afford. A pathetic scene; a grief-stricken community, sharing in the immensity of the loss experienced by this woman. Not only is the joy of her life dead, but her security is gone. Who will provide for her now? How will she, a woman alone in 1st century Palestine, eke out a living now? Who will stand up for her? The community has come out in force to support her, yet she feels alone in her grief.

Perhaps this story of a grief from so long ago is not so very far away from the emotional experience of those much closer to us....

Jesus and his disciples see the funeral procession as it leaves the city and he immediately perceives and feels the depths of the woman's misery and helplessness. No one asks him to do anything and there is no mention of anyone's faith. Unlike Jairus, begging for Jesus to heal his daughter, and being told "just believe", the widow says nothing, asks for nothing. Perhaps she is so overwhelmed by grief that she can't, she has no hope. There is nothing to ask for. But Jesus sees and knows her helplessness and despair. "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said unto her, 'weep not.'" In another version of the bible his reaction is described like this: "When Jesus saw her, his heart broke. He said to her, 'Don't cry.'" Of course the woman is crying, but Jesus encourages her not to despair because he is with her and there is hope. Did you notice that when Jesus looks at the woman with compassion, Luke calls him "the Lord" (this is the first time Luke calls Jesus that). Jesus' compassion is displayed as a revelation of the Lord God's compassion, just as the power he will display is an expression of God's power.

Throughout the story, the focus is on Jesus' response to the woman's suffering. He takes the initiative. He sees her pain and isolation and he acts out of sheer compassion for her. There's an additional poignancy here for us who know the full Gospel story to its conclusion, because we are reminded that one day Jesus' own widowed mother will lose her only son. . . .

When Jesus touches the coffin, the bearers stand still – freeze –, no doubt horrified. He has broken the purity laws by touching that which is untouchable. What is going on? Jesus then addresses the young man and his words have life-giving power. The young man is raised to life and Jesus gives him back to his mother. This stranger has restored her world; at the same time, he has changed it forever.

The crowd would have remembered an old bible story they would know well, when the prophet Elijah raised a widow's son, and they start shouting that Jesus is a great prophet, and the message of this miracle spreads like wild-fire.

How are we supposed to react to this story? Some people might not take it too seriously, maybe not literally, because it took place a long time ago and doesn't make sense in a 21st century science-focused world. Some people may doubt the boy was really dead, perhaps he was in a deep vegetative state. Or perhaps this is not meant to be literal but an allegory for a *spiritual* reawakening for the boy. Perhaps some of us feel angry when we hear this story. Why did Jesus raise this boy from the dead and not others. What was special about this woman? Why was the one I loved not restored to life when I prayed so *hard*? What about those who are grieving now from tragedies, accidents, street stabbings, sudden deaths? People who have grieved for those lost in all the terrorist attacks or gun shooting sprees, particularly when they have happened in schools? Those who grieve for lost loved ones, and even for lost pets?...

In our deepest grief and fiercest struggles, most of us long to feel God beside us, transforming our sufferings. But sometimes we may be so blinded by misery that we are unaware of God's presence, or even shut him out. Like the widow of Nain, we may be paralysed by grief and unable to ask anything of God. Even in that darkness, God is beside us; when our senses are closed to him, and we have no faith or hope – that's what this story tells us. Jesus reached out to touch the coffin, and he reaches out to touch the untouchable places in our lives too.

Take a moment to remember the pain of the victims and relatives and friends of those who have lost their lives tragically, senselessly; reflect on your own pain and heartache. Imagine Jesus looking at you and his heart breaking because of your pain. Imagine him speaking to *you*. What does he say that brings *you* hope?