

Pentecost 2 C  
June 10, 2007: Wesley 9.00 & 10.30am

### **Luke 7: 11-17**

This gospel story of a miraculous resuscitation follows directly upon another miracle story, the healing of the centurion's slave. And the healing of the centurion's slave follows directly from Jesus' most famous sermon, which in Luke is called the Sermon on the Plain but which is more widely remembered by Matthew's account of it - the Sermon on the Mount. That's the progression in this section of Luke's Gospel – from wise sayings in a sermon, to healing, to the circumstance Jesus addresses today - life and death. The progression is important. From wisdom – to healing – to life.

In the sermon on the plain, Jesus is shown to be a man who has plenty of wise sayings; he is a good teacher. We know the sermon well –

*The beatitudes:* “blessed are the poor”, “blessed are those who weep”, “blessed are you who are hungry” for yours will be the kingdom of God.

*The sage like sayings:* “love your enemies”, “do not look at the speck in your neighbour's eye whilst ignoring the log in your own”, “build your house upon the rock”.

They are among Jesus' better known efforts. They inform our faith and give us some light to live by.

The sermon then flows into a miracle.... And it is in the healing of the centurion's slave that Jesus' authority is shown to amount to more than just the uttering of wise sayings. He is shown to have power over disease.

You may recall the Centurion deep faith, his deep concern for his slave – his slave! – and his famous words to Jesus: “Only speak the word and let my servant be healed.” And indeed it was so. The servant was healed because Jesus spoke to him.

The healing takes place in Capernaum, which is at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, and begins with the words, “After Jesus had finished all his sayings....” From the wise sayings we move to healing.

Today's reading also follows the theme of Jesus' miraculous power, but it escalates both the drama and the signs of God's capacity to work through this man.

The person at the centre of this story is not ill; he has died. The people of the town of Nain are in the process of burying him when Jesus and a crowd of followers come upon them. Jesus is on the way from Capernaum towards Jerusalem when he passes through Nain, a town directly on the path of their journey and about one third of the way to the great city.

The situation of a funeral might have caused Jesus, and his followers, to give the town a wide berth. At this point, there would seem nothing that a wise teacher like Jesus could do. He had previously demonstrated his power over the forces of illness. But, whether through illness or injury, this situation had progressed terminally. It made more sense for him to keep a respectful distance from the ritually unclean presence of a corpse.

But something seems to have moved Jesus very deeply in the town of Nain.

The Greek verb *splagnizomai*, which Luke uses here to describe Jesus' response to what he is witnessing, is a word that relates to the emotions we feel right within our "innards". If you can recall an occasion that made you upset right to the pit of your stomach, that is what has happened here. Jesus' reaction to the scene as he passed by got to him right in the centre of his being.

You see, the young dead man was the *only* son of a widow. Jesus' compassion was for something more than a passing corpse. He feels, right within his stomach, *the pain of the living*. In losing this son, the widow lost not only the love of her life, but also her income and her security. That son would have been her only bread winner.

The feeling in his stomach leads Jesus to speak and act. He said to the woman, "Do not weep". Then he touched the coffin and spoke to the one within it: "Young man, I say to you, get up!" When the son rose, Luke writes, Jesus "gave him back to his mother". His life had been restored; *but so had hers*.

It may seem odd that Jesus spoke directly to a corpse. Words are for the living. Corpses have ears, but only the living have ears to hear (Luke 8.8 & 14.35).

But our faith is situated in trust  
and our trust is in the belief  
that the words of Jesus are not ordinary human words.  
Through his words, God speaks.  
The same voice that spoke into darkness before creation,  
spoke into this lifeless body.  
And the result was the same – life where there was no life.

The progression of Luke's gospel about Jesus  
is very important and illuminating especially at this point.  
Here in chapters 6 though 7  
Jesus' moves from speaking wisdom in his sermon,  
to speaking healing to the slave,  
to speaking life to the dead.  
From wisdom, to healing, to life.  
Eventually God will speak a word through him on the cross  
and accomplish not a single resuscitation  
but the victory of life over death.

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I am not sure about your own experience,  
but I can see here in the flow from chapter 6 to chapter 7 of Luke  
something of the progression of my own Christian travels.

At one level, I know that Jesus speaks words of wisdom;  
they are words which resonate truth -  
for Christians, and for many who are not.

I think, also, that I know his words of healing.  
He speaks words of healing;  
his words can lift and bless the most broken down spirit.

But finally however, beyond wisdom and beyond healing,  
we come to that deepest of levels;  
we are shown here, in this story,  
that Jesus' words have the power to bring life.  
Here is his real and distinctive authority.  
There are many sages and many healers;  
but there is only one Lord of heaven and earth.

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Our faith is a faith for life and for death.  
Not *life* and *death* as in 'the stakes are high',  
but *life* and *death* as in these two realities are held together  
by one who has a greater authority than either of them;  
One who has power over them both.  
And when we have heard this, when we have heard –  
“young man [or “young woman”]...get up”.  
we have heard and taken hold of the treasure hidden in the field.

No one can pretend that death – especially untimely death – is not the most bitter food in life.  
Least of all should a Christian presume to understand or explain it except with trembling humility.  
What we can explain and seek to live under, however, is our hope – our hope that Jesus is more than a wise teacher and more than a healer;  
He is the one who has the words of eternal life.



That we have a God who is a God of life, and a God triumphant over death, can best be witnessed to by people of faith at the moment of death itself.  
A prison doctor described Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death in this way:

“Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison clothes, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this loveable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps of the gallows, brave and composed. He said ‘This is the end; for me, the beginning of life’. His death ensued after a few seconds. In almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely into the will of God.”

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
By his great mercy we have been born anew to a loving hope  
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... (1 Peter 1.3)*