

THE ANSWER TO A MOTHER'S CRY

Luke 7v11-16

I've been in Sheffield this week doing Old Testament Theology lectures at one of our *Newfrontiers* training bases. In the course of the two days I came again to one of the characteristic features of the Bible – the way it includes people in their bitter moments flinging questions at God. There is no attempt to airbrush this out.

The Prophet Jonah asks why God should spare cruel Nineveh from judgment. Habakkuk, asks why God seems to turn a blind eye to the wicked, and how could God use foreign nations as instruments of judgment on His own people. Some of the Psalms ask hard questions too – we tend not to turn to them when we want an uplifting Bible passage; we prefer Psalm 23. But it is in the Wisdom literature that we come across this most: the Philosopher in *Ecclesiastes* asking: “*What’s the point of life; what does it all mean?*”; and of course Job, who asked big questions because he was experiencing personal catastrophe on all sides.

Today we are going to look at a woman who must have been asking some bitter questions: she was already a widow and now her only son had died. Imagine the things she might have been saying: “*God, are you there? God, don’t you care? What have I done to deserve this? Where are you when we need you most? What about the great miracles we read about in the past? What about the great prophets like Elijah and Elisha who raised widow’s sons? Did these miracles even happen, or it is all a fiction? And what am I to do now? I’m all alone in the world. How am I going to manage?*” Let’s look at what happened next & see the answer to this mother’s cry:

v11: (Jesus) went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. Nain was a small town one day’s walk from Capernaum. It was not a famous place, this is the only mention it gets in the Bible. But Jesus would have known it well. From the hill on which Nazareth is set Jesus could look south and see the white tops of homes in Nain six miles away. In a round-about way I’m encouraged by this. Jesus knows *about* places which rarely get a mention and which live in the shadow of more famous locations. And here he walks *into Nain*; he doesn’t just visit well known towns or work in power only in the big city.

v12: As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out.. Nain means “Pleasant” but it is not “Pleasantville” on this day. The air is full of cries and wailing. A funeral procession! Burials always took place outside town and city walls, and so the mourners are moving out of the city at the very moment Jesus arrives with a large crowd accompanying him. This looks like a coincidence – the two groups converging - but can we really speak of coincidences where Jesus is concerned? More like a “*God-incidence*”. I remember a pastor whose wife had died telling that he stood in the corridor of his home weeping one day and calling out to God: “*O God, put your arms around me!*” At that moment a

knock came on the door. One of the pastor's fellow leaders was there and immediately embraced him, saying "*I was passing and just felt I should call.*"

So the two groups meet, the funeral procession and the crowd following Jesus – but in their culture the visitors must stop and show quiet respect as the mourners pass. **A man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.** Being a widow was synonymous with hardship. This woman's life had already been a tough one and now she has suffered another tragedy. In the Jewish Scriptures the grief of a mother on the death of an only son is seen as the deepest of all sorrows. Jeremiah 6v26: "*O my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes; mourn with bitter wailing as for an only son.*" (See also: Zechariah 12v10, Amos 8v10)

We are not told what age he was but he was not a child. Later in the incident Jesus refers to him as a *neaniskos*, a *young man*, a term used for someone under the age of 40. Even then this was unnaturally young for him to die. A man's average lifespan at that time was 50-55 years and then, as now, a mother did not expect to outlive her child. So this poor woman has suffered another personal tragedy; but she has also lost her only male provider *and* the family line has ended' **and a considerable crowd from the town was with her.** There is a lot of sympathy and good will being shown. A large crowd has turned out. Everybody knows that her plight is desperate.

v13: And when the Lord saw her... The grief stricken woman is walking alone at the head of the funeral procession. This would have included professional mourners. One Jewish authority laid down this instruction for a funeral: "*Even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman.*" ...**He had compassion on her.** (NIV. "His heart went out to her.") Nobody asks Jesus to do anything. He may not even have been noticed. Perhaps it doesn't occur to anyone to ask him to do anything. After all, it was too late. The man was dead. Perhaps if Jesus had come a little earlier - as Mary and Martha had said concerning their brother Lazarus.

He had compassion on her... William Barclay comments that to the ancient world this was not a characteristic associated with deity. Stoicism for example, taught that the primary characteristic of deity was aloofness - the ability to be unaffected by pain and suffering. But the God of the Bible feels deeply. In this case the strong emotion is compassion, **and said to her, "Do not weep."** You can hear the tenderness in his voice. This is what Jesus is like. We say the same sometimes, don't we? "*Don't cry! It's all right!*" In our case we want to express sympathy but we don't know what to say. But whenever Jesus speaks his words have a power to bring about change - in us, and in the situation.

v14: Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. This was not a coffin (NIV) it was a wicker work stretcher on which the body lay wrapped in a shroud. Jesus **came up and touched the bier.** This is a jaw-dropping action. It

means he is ceremonially defiled. All sorts of dire warnings could be found in Rabbinic writings about such an act. It meant you could not go to any place of worship; it meant you were in spiritual quarantine for a period. This is probably something few had seen before. Is this why the bearers stop in their tracks? Or do they realise this is Jesus and have heard about him and about amazing miracles?

And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” Jesus is speaking to the dead! He is giving instructions to a corpse! Who can do that? only someone who is mad or someone in a different league from the rest of us. He did the same on another occasion with a 12 year old girl, the daughter of a synagogue ruler. (Luke 8v54, Mark 5v41). In Mark’s Gospel the writer records the actual Aramaic word Jesus used, so memorable was the moment. *“Talitha koum” – “Little girl, I say to you arise!”* Here it is **“Young man, I say to you, arise.”**

v15: And the dead man sat up: Such was the power of his command! Luke uses the medical word for a patient sitting up in bed! **The dead man sat up and began to speak:** This was no trick, no illusion; he was alive! **And Jesus gave him to his mother.** Jesus had done this primarily for her; it was an act of compassion, the answer to a mother’s cry. But it was more! There were layers of significance to just about everything Jesus did and said. This raising of the young man was also a mighty prophetic act. It was Christ’s first public indication that he had come to bring resurrection life. It was a glimpse ahead to the great purpose for which Jesus Himself had come: his own death and resurrection – *the* one and only Son. Because of this all who look to him in faith will hear the same words. **“I say to you arise”.** Because of Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection, we can be set free from sin and guilt, reconciled to God and have hope beyond the grave.

v16: Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” The crowd’s reaction has an authentic ring - fear, then a burst of glory to God. They began to speak of Jesus as a mighty prophet. This is no ordinary man. He is not even an ordinary prophet. **“A great prophet has arisen among us!”** What Jesus had done immediately reminds them of Elijah and Elisha’s miracles, one at least in nearby Shunem.

“God has visited His people”. Back in verse 13 Luke had slipped a word into his description of this incident which we could easily miss. This is the first time in his Gospel he has given Jesus the title of **Lord**. It is deliberate. This is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament for God Himself. *Kurios* – Lord! This incident was worthy of the title. *Jesus is Lord*. The people didn’t realise the full significance of what they were saying. **“God has visited his people”.** Yes, this is what the coming of Jesus is all about, God coming among men and women; becoming flesh and blood. But not on a fleeting visit! He is still with us by His Spirit, in His people. He is still living and active around the world, in this nation and yes, here in our towns and villages and communities, and in our lives.

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When I arrived in Sheffield on Wednesday I took a taxi from the Railway Station to where I was to stay. The driver, a young Yorkshire/ Chinese man, was talkative. When he heard what I did for a living we soon got on to God. I asked him if he had a faith and he said *"No!"* He didn't believe in God. How could he when there was so much suffering and religion caused so much trouble? None of his circle of family or friends had any faith and he didn't know any Christians; *"but you didn't need to be religious to be good,"* he said. He wasn't Mr. Angry. He wasn't having a go at me. He was talking in a relaxed and good natured way.

The journey was only going to take ten minutes so what could I say? As we neared my destination I said to him: *"Can I suggest something very dangerous to you?"* I had his attention. *"Try this simple prayer: "God, if you are there, if you are real, show me", and see what happens!"* He laughed and said he might just do that.

"God, if you are there, if you are real, show me!" If the woman in our story prayed this kind of prayer in her distress, then she certainly got her answer.

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