

June 1, 2003
Sunday of the Blind Man

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

For its blending of compassion, brevity, and dramatic resolution, few episodes in the gospels, I think, surpass the story of the widow of Nain.

The scene (Luke 7:11-17) is unforgettable. Two large and very different crowds of people, neither at first aware of the other, are about to meet in the narrow confines of a village street. The first, a wailing funeral cortege, winds its mournful way toward the cemetery (discovered by modern archeology) that lies east of the city. The dead man is borne on an open bier, the only son of his widowed mother. Before this procession ever leaves the village, however, it encounters the second crowd, which comes marching in from the opposite direction. These two large masses of people, slowing down as they draw nigh, now meet in the tight confines of the narrow street.

On an ordinary day, ordinary decency and universal custom would dictate, of course, that the advantage of passage should be conceded to the funeral procession. This is not, however, an ordinary day, nor is this second group of people an ordinary assembly. It is the Church of Jesus Christ, who walks out in front of her as the author and perfecter of her faith.

Jesus, looking with compassion on the bereaved woman (7:13; compare John 11:33), steps forward and tells her to stop weeping. Then, very deliberately, he extends His hand and touches the bier, bringing the procession to an abrupt stop. Completely in charge of this utterly dramatic situation, He addresses the corpse, "Young man, I say to you, arise." The latter does so, and Jesus restores him to his mother. It is a scene of tender mercy and enormous majesty.

As this story of the widow of Nain is found only in Luke among the evangelists, it seems best to study it first within the literary framework of that gospel, where it is situated in both a general and an immediate context.

In its immediate context, this narrative directly follows the account of Jesus' healing of the centurion's servant (7:1-10).

In each instance the miracle is the Lord's response to the interests and affections of a third party, namely, the

centurion and the widow. There is also a contrast between the two accounts that was noticed by St. Cyril of Alexandria many centuries ago: "But observe how He joins miracle to miracle; in the prior instance, the healing of the centurion's servant, He was offered an invitation. Here, however, He draws near without being invited. . . . To me it seems that He purposely made this next miracle to follow the first" (Homily 36 on Luke).

Likewise in its immediate context, Luke's story of what happened at Nain is directly followed by his account of the delegation that John the Baptist sends to Jesus from prison (7:18-23). Jesus, in His response to that delegation, refers explicitly to the raising of the dead. The event at Nain, then, is preparatory to the very next narrative in Luke's sequence.

Certain aspects of this story are significant within the yet more general context of Lukan themes. For instance, Luke's very wording of the miracle, in which Jesus "presented him to his mother," is found verbatim in the Greek text of 1 Kings 17:23, where Elijah restored her dead son to the woman of Zarephath. Luke had spoken of this woman earlier (4:26).

Likewise, Jesus' compassion for the bereaved widow is of whole cloth with Luke's attention to this sustained trait of the Lord's ministry. One thinks of the crippled woman that Jesus heals in the synagogue (13:10-17), the sinful woman whose ministry He accepts in the house of the Pharisee (7:36-50), and the two sisters at Bethany (10:38-42).

Within the larger reference of Luke's theology, however, the most important detail in this story would seem to be his reference to Jesus as "Lord" in 7:13 - "When the *Lord* saw her . . ." This is the first time that Luke refers to Jesus by that title which is His by virtue of His resurrection (Acts 2:34-36) and by which He is invoked in the act of saving faith (1 Corinthians 8:6; 12:3; Philippians 2:11). From this point on in Luke's gospel, Jesus will often be called "Lord" (e.g., 10:1,41; 11:39; 12:42; 13:15); indeed, Luke calls Him by this title in the very next story, the account of the delegation of John the Baptist (7:19 in the manuscripts preferred here). It is most significant, however, that Luke first calls Jesus "Lord" in the context of His manifest authority over death. It is chiefly in His vanquishing of death that the Church addresses Jesus as Lord.

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