

September 26, 2010
St. John the Evangelist

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Jesus, when He arrives at the gate of a town called Nain, is accompanied, not only by His disciples, but also by a large crowd. The gateway is narrow, so these companions, endeavoring to enter, completely fill it (Luke 7:11-16).

The congestion at the gate is a disadvantage to a second group---also large---which is trying to *leave* the town; this is a funeral cortege, accompanying the body of a recently deceased young man. The two crowds encounter each other at the gate. One side, it would seem, must give way to the other---or is there a third option?

Actually, there is: Jesus walks up to the funeral procession and stops it.

According to Luke, our Lord does four things in this scene: He *sees* the dead man's bereaved mother, He *feels* compassion for her, He *touches* the bier, and He *speaks*.

This narrative contains a twofold message. First, it is a story of life triumphant over death. Luke, in his description of the event, refers to Jesus as "Lord"---*Kyrios*---the title by which the early Christians normally designated the risen Messiah, victorious over death and the grave (Acts 2:36). This is the first time the Lukan narrative voice refers to Jesus by this title (cf. 10:1,39,41; 11:39; 12:42; 13:15; 17:5,6; 18:6; 19:8,31,34; 22:61; 24:3,34). Here, then, at the gate of Nain, death encounters the *Lord*---"the author of life" (Acts 3:15)---and the march to the grave stops abruptly.

Second, it is a story of Jesus' compassion. The root of the action in this scene is His spontaneous gaze of sympathy. Recognizing the dead man's mother as a widow with no other children---and no other means of support---He seizes the hour. Indeed, Jesus' compassion is qualified by this significant detail: the dead son is an "only child." In Luke's Gospel, this is the first of three miracles Jesus works for the benefit of parents of an "only child" (*monogenes*).

In fact, this detail is a distinctive feature in Luke, who thus identifies the daughter of Jairus (8:42; contrast Matthew 9:18; Mark 5:23) and the epileptic son (9:38; contrast Matthew 17:15; Mark 9:17). This Lukan feature points to our Lord's particular and nuanced sympathy for parents who would lose an "only child."

This account should also be compared to Luke's later story of Jesus healing the crippled "daughter of Abraham" in the synagogue. In both cases, everything begins when Jesus sees the woman in distress (13:12).

It is also worth remarking---with St. Gregory Palamas---that this narrative of the funeral procession in Nain makes no mention of faith, nor does Jesus require faith on the part of anybody in the account---least of all the dead man! As for him, wrote Gregory, he was only "deaf dust" (*ho kophos chous*), which, nonetheless, "heard Him call into existence things that have no existence" (*Homilies* 46.8).

Luke sums up what Jesus accomplishes with respect to the dead man: "and He restored him to his mother." This clause, which repeats word-for-word the Greek text of 1 Kings 17:23, puts the reader in mind of the prophet Elijah, who raised the dead son of the widow of Zarephath. Evidently the witnesses of Jesus' miracle also remembered that earlier story, because they exclaimed, "a great *prophet* has risen among us."

Nonetheless, this implied reference to Elijah (and perhaps to Elisha, as well---cf. 2 Kings 4:18-36) also indicates a contrast between Jesus and the Old Testament parallel. St. Gregory Palamas observed that, in the Elijah story, the widow approached the prophet, whereas in the present narrative Jesus arrives "self-invited" (*avtokletos*). Nor, Gregory goes on, is our Lord obliged, like Elijah, to offer elaborate prayers over the dead body (*op. cit.*, 46.5). With total authority, Jesus simply commands, "Rise up, I tell you!"

St. Cyril of Alexandria observed yet another contrast---this one between the present event and the one that immediately precedes it in the Lukan sequence: the healing of the centurion's servant. Whereas in the former case, Cyril remarked, Jesus responded to an explicit petition, here He acts with complete spontaneity (*Homilies on Luke* 36).

This is an account, then, of Jesus' invincible power in the service of His spontaneous compassion for the widow bereaved of her only son. To each He speaks with authority: "Weep no more!" and "Young man, rise up, I tell you!"

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