

Self-confidence

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Lord, you have taught us
that all our doings without love are nothing worth:
send your Holy Spirit
and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love,
the true bond of peace and all virtues,
without which whoever lives is counted dead before you.

Our text is from today's gospel – Luke chapter 10 and verse 13:

‘When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her
and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’

Are you confident? Are you a confident individual? Do you have a reasonable degree of self-confidence? I think I am; I feel I am; I know I can be confident – but there are times when my confidence in myself and my ability to cope is challenged. Up till January last year, I couldn't swim. I was afraid of the water and I guess, in the middle of a deep end, I still may be. But over a year now, I have learnt to overcome that fear and I have become a competent if not wholly confident swimmer. My sermon today, which is rooted in the healing of the Widow of Nain's dead son, will try to answer the question why we as Christians have every reason to be confident.

But first, the miracle. Jesus has come from Capernaum and is just about to enter the town of Nain some 5 miles to the south east of Nazareth, known home ground for Jesus, when he encounters a funeral procession. Jesus has just healed at a distance the servant of a Roman Centurion based at Capernaum who was on the point of death. That non-Jew's faith in Jesus and his understanding of Jesus' authority is impressive. But here, Jesus is in the presence of a dead young man, his widowed mother's only son, and we know nothing of her faith in Jesus or whether she even recognises Jesus through her tears and grief when he stops the funeral procession by touching the bier on which her dead boy is laid out.

The miracle is quick and impressive. Jesus speaks to the dead lad: 'Young man, I say to you, rise' and he responds by sitting up and speaking. He is cured. The verb in Greek doctor Luke uses for sitting up, ανακαθίζω (anakathzio) is the same verb you use when a patient sits up cured of what ailed him ! Then Jesus restores her son to his mother.

The miracle is impressive by any standard but it echoes two great Old Testament miracles, one where Elijah cures the Widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17), and one where Elisha cures the Shunammite's woman's son (2 Kings 4). Any Jew familiar with scripture would recognise the parallels and see that Jesus was a prophet in the same tradition and of similar status as these two major Jewish prophets.

But for me, what is truly exciting about this miracle is not so much what Jesus does but what Jesus feels. A funeral procession would be a noisy affair, full of the

sound of grief and mourning . Better out than in. Better to give vent to your sense of loss than to bottle it up which is what we English, with our stiff upper lips, have been taught to do since childhood. There is a simple statement about the dead young man – ‘He was his mother’s only son’ – and when Jesus sees the mother, Luke writes ‘he had compassion on her and said to her “Do not weep”’.

Now the verb Luke uses here, σπλαγχνιζομαι (splanchnizomai), which we translate as compassion, is a powerful Greek word which literally suggests that our centre of feeling is rooted in the pit of our stomach, literally the bowels of compassion (Colossians 3 v12). Jesus is actually feeling what the mother is feeling. Jesus, the Son of God, is not only wholly what it is for God to be God but he is also fully what it is for a person to be a human being. As such, Jesus has the capacity for fellow feeling – that’s what compassion means – and he is moved by her sadness to take pity on that widowed mother in her desolation and in her sense of loss. On two other occasions, Luke uses this same word: once when the Samaritan sees the naked, bruised and bloody traveller on the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho (10 v33); and once when the Prodigal Son’s father sees his boy limping home barefoot, ragged and weary (15 v20).

Which brings me to the question I posed at the start of today’s sermon: why can we as Christians feel confident? Simply this. Because God loves us. Because he has compassion for us. Because in his eyes we are worth dying for. So next time you are feeling down or low and doubt you have any value for anyone, remember this – that we are all made in the image of God and that he is there for us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in whose name I have spoken. Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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