

The Widow of Nain. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 29 April 2015.

As you know, we are now well on the way through our series of talks about Bible characters who feature in the gospels of the New Testament. This week we meet one of several widows who we find there.¹ This particular widow is mentioned in only one of the gospels – that written by Doctor Luke – and my reading comes from chapter 7:

And it came to pass soon afterwards, that He (the Lord Jesus) went into a town called Nain, and His disciples and a great crowd went with Him.

And as He drew near to the gate of the town, behold, there was carried out one who had died, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a large crowd from the town was with her.

And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her, and said to her, 'Do not go on weeping'.

And coming up He touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And He said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise'.

And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and He (the Lord Jesus) gave him to his mother.

Then fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' and 'God has visited His people!'

As I read, Luke introduced this narrative with the words, 'And it came to pass soon afterwards'; thereby joining it to that which he had reported immediately before. This was the account of the healing by our Lord of the servant of a Roman centurion at Capernaum. Doctor Luke had reported of that servant that he had been 'sick, at the point of death'.² But, without even entering the house where the servant lay, the Lord had healed him.³

It is likely that Luke has deliberately linked that narrative with this for us to see that the Saviour was able with His word, not only to heal a dying person from a distance, but to raise back to life one who had actually died – hence his (Luke's) carefully chosen words, 'there was carried out one who *had* died'.⁴ Out of compassion for a gentile centurion, our Lord pulled the one back from dying, and, out of compassion for a Jewish widow,⁵ He raised the other who was already dead.

As I said, the Lord had been at Capernaum, but He had then journeyed for some 25 miles to the town of Nain – a journey which would have taken Him by far the best part of a day – even though He had received no request to do so. Indeed, this is the only time we read of Nain in the entire Bible.⁶ Yet, this widow's great need was the only 'request' that the Lord needed.

It was as Jesus drew near to the gate of the town that He came face to face with the widow. We know that it was the practice of the Jews to bury their dead outside their towns, and, interestingly, archaeologists have located tombs in the rocks alongside the road which leads to Nain from Capernaum. We read of two large companies which met near the gateway to the town – the one 'with Him',⁷ and the other 'with her'.⁸

But Luke directs our attention, not to the crowds, but to Jesus, and to the widow and her son. In one sense, here we see two who are described as being 'only' sons – for the New Testament uses the very same word⁹ to describe our Lord's relationship to God the Father, as does Luke here to describe the relationship of the dead young man to his mother. But there the similarity ends. For the one was then dead, but was destined soon to live, whereas the Other was then alive, but was destined soon to die.

In keeping with Jewish custom, the bereaved mother led the funeral procession. In few words Luke sets the heart-rending scene, 'there was carried out one who had died, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow'. Funerals tend by their nature to be sad occasions, but it is difficult to envisage a more painful event than this. At some point in the past, this lady had lost her husband, and now all she has in the world lies on the bier, the stretcher bearing the lifeless body of the one she had brought into the world to its earthly resting place.

We can only guess the likely series of recent events – left to imagine her watchful concern when her boy first fell ill, the unsuccessful use of such means as were known, or at least as came within reach of the widow, her deepening anxiety, her passionate longing to retain her most precious treasure,¹⁰ and then the gradual fading of all hopes, the fond farewell, and then the terrible eruption of sorrow when she knew herself to be bereft of her only child. And with his death she lost, not only all hope of perpetuating her late husband's name and line (which was no small matter in Israel), but she lost her final source of support and protection in a world which then had precious little to offer a childless widow. Any prospect of financial support from her two near male relatives was gone – it had died with her only son.

But everything was soon – and suddenly – to change. For ‘when the Lord saw her’, we read, He had compassion on her, and said to her, ‘Do not go on weeping’. For this was to be not a meeting only of two multitudes, but, far more importantly, a meeting (a confrontation, no less) between that which one of Job’s so-called friends described in the Old Testament as ‘the King of Terrors’¹¹ – namely, death itself – and Him who is spoken of in the New Testament as ‘the Prince (the originator, the author) of Life’.¹²

In that the widow walked at the front of the funeral procession, it was, of course, natural for our Lord to speak to her before, as we read, ‘coming up, He touched the bier, compelling the bearers to halt abruptly. Mindful of the tears which blinded her eyes, the One who came, as we read elsewhere, ‘to bind up the broken-hearted’, gently spoke His word of comfort, ‘Do not go on weeping’.

And any sense of anticipation which such words, together with His action of touching the bier, may have aroused, was not long in being gratified, for, speaking directly to the lifeless form of the widow’s son, He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, arise’. In response to which, as we read, ‘the dead man sat up and began to speak, and He (the Lord Jesus) gave him to his mother’.

Such was the power then of our Lord’s word. Nor has it lost any of its power.

No doubt you have heard of the ‘Mutiny on the Bounty’. Well, yesterday (the 28th of April) was the anniversary of the date in 1789 when Acting Lieutenant Fletcher Christian seized control of HMS Bounty from Captain William Bligh, setting him and his supporters adrift in an overloaded lifeboat.

Having later kidnapped some women in Tahiti, nine of the mutineers journeyed to an uninhabited island – Pitcairn Island – but, partly on account of whiskey which they distilled from a native plant, drunkenness and fighting marked the small colony. Disease and murder eventually took the lives of all the original men except one, Alexander Smith, who found the Bounty’s neglected Bible. As he read it, he took its message to heart, and began instructing the little community in the scriptures. The message of Christ so transformed their lives that 20 years later, in 1808, when the American Whaling ship Topaz landed on the island, it found a happy society of Christians, living in prosperity and peace, free from crime, disease, and murder. The Bible is now on display in the church in Pitcairn as a monument to its transforming message.¹³

But let me close by noting the reaction of the many people who witnessed the power of our Lord’s word in today’s reading.

Recalling perhaps two incidents when, over 800 years before, two separate Old Testament ‘prophets’ had been empowered by God to raise from death the sons of two very different women (one of them a widow), and who had then restored the living boys to their mothers,¹⁴ the response of the large number of eyewitnesses was not wholly unexpected: ‘they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” Well, He is certainly that. But so much more. Not only ‘a great prophet’, but, as the Bible says, ‘our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ’.¹⁵

A great *Saviour* indeed! For the historical incident we have just read is, in some ways, also an acted parable. Hear the words of the apostle Paul, ‘you were dead (dead *spiritually*, that is) in trespasses and sins ... God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us ... made us alive together with Christ ... you have been saved through faith, and not of your own doing’.¹⁶

Footnotes

¹ Cf. Mark 12. 42; Luke 2. 37.

² Luke 7. 2.

³ Luke 7. 10; Matt. 8. 12.

⁴ Luke 7. 12.

⁵ Contrast the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath, Luke 4. 26.

⁶ It is rare for Luke to note the location of an event in his gospel.

⁷ Luke 7. 11.

⁸ Luke 7. 12.

⁹ The word, *μονογενης*. See John 1. 14, 18; 3. 16, 18, and compare its use in Luke 8. 42 and 9. 38.

¹⁰ F.W. Farrar points out the emotional nuances of the Greek phrase that underlies 'the only son of his mother' – 'The dative is here expressive of more tender feeling than the ordinary genitive would have been. It is the dative of advantage, and expresses the preciousness of the son to the mother', F. W. Farrar, *The Gospel According to St Luke*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges, page 198.

¹¹ Job 18. 14.

¹² Acts 3. 15.

¹³ R. J. Morgan, *On this day: 365 amazing and inspiring stories about saints, martyrs & heroes*, Thomas Nelson Publishers. April 28th.

¹⁴ 1 Kings 17. 17-24; 2 Kings 4. 18-37.

¹⁵ Tit. 2. 13.

¹⁶ Eph. 2. 1-8.