

THE LORD OF LIFE AND DEATH

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Text: Luke 7:11-17

Can God really do anything for this bigoted, blood-thirsty, blood-minded world of ours? From time to time that question haunts me like a nasty nagging nightmare. It haunts me when I think of what is taking place on the international scene. Nations sooner spend money on military hardware than on programs for the poor and underprivileged. I think of three out of every five people in the world going to bed hungry tonight; and sixty percent of the world's population trying to stay alive on the protein equivalent of one thin slice of ham a day. It haunts me, nationally, when I day-dream about going back to Ireland this summer. I think of innocent civilians who one moment are just out shopping and five minutes later are being picked up in little pieces and deposited in plastic bags to be buried, unidentified. It haunts me when I look realistically at so much of our church life. In the midst of all the chirpy optimism that I hear about revival and renewal I cannot help but wonder why we can still spend more on dog food and cosmetics than we do for missions. And with all the showy, trumpeting preaching about new life for the asking, I think of the words of Arthur J. Gossip as being aptly descriptive of the church when he says: "Our earthly conventions and ways, our grabbiness and pushfulness and self-indulgence are as local and parochial as a country accent." And it haunts me when I look honestly at my own life. I think of returning from a prayer-meeting and being nasty to my wife. Or I think of standing by the casket of a man I

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buried some months ago. He took a tumble down the stairs and bashed his brains in. So I stand by his casket and I grope prayerfully for a word from God for this hour; but deep down I want to cry out that life is mystery and misery and blood and sweat and tears!

The great danger of course is that the sheer mass of this misery will drive us to despair. We are tempted to believe that nobody—no not even Almighty God Himself—can really do anything for us! Or maybe it will make of us theological cynics. Take, for instance, a little poem by a student at the University of Kentucky, called “An Open Poem to God.” It runs:

Thank you, God, for everything;
For wars and poverty,
For racial riots and discrimination,
For political propaganda,
For corrupt governments and leaders,
For starvation and over-population—
Thank you, God, for Heaven—
For we’ve served our time in Hell.

The marvel of the Bible is that it will never allow you to be deluded by that kind of despair or cynicism. In it you will find all the realism one can request: you will find bigots and big-shots, the prejudiced and the prostitute, murderers and malefactors, the theologically perplexed and the theologically perverted. But you will also find a note of triumph and victory that shatters our despair and turns our sunsets into sunrises. There’s a story about a widow in Luke’s gospel, chapter seven, that highlights this note of triumph with fitting eloquence. Both the context and the content of this short episode in the life of our Lord are worthy of our attention.

Turning to the context, the story of the widow of Nain is embedded in a mosaic of events that Luke has obviously brought together in order to insist emphatically that Jesus Christ is triumphant Lord no matter what the situation.

We see this to begin with in a situation where the slave of a respectable and devout Roman centurian is “sick and at the point of death.” Humanly speaking, this sick slave is exceptionally fortunate. He has a master who has money, who is deeply religious, who displays a humility not even seen in Israel, as Jesus Himself attests, and of course a master who cares enough to send for help when others of his trade would cheerfully send him away to die. But they are at the end of their tether where

this sickness is concerned. All they can do is send for Jesus. The need is met so quickly that all that Luke records is: "And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave well" (v. 10).

We find this note of triumph once again in the episode devoted to John the Baptist, beginning in verse 18. In John, of course, we meet a theological giant of the first degree. Jesus Himself refers to him as a prophet and even "more than a prophet" (v. 26). Indeed John had earlier come to see Jesus as the beloved Son of God who had come from the Father to purify and renew, to heal and to save, as is made clear in chapter two. But things had changed from those earlier days of confident preaching and ministry when people had flocked to be baptized. John is in prison now; the congregation he once had has dwindled to one and that one does not exactly show much prospect of conversion for he is a proud, superstitious, and seductive king named Herod. So the seeds of doubt have sprouted and John sends two disciples to Jesus with the question: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" That Jesus is triumphant Lord of this situation is succinctly stated in two verses that are crammed with life:

In that hour he cured many diseases and plagues and evil spirits and on many that were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, "Go, and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them" (vv. 21–22).

The last part of Luke 7 is devoted to a very different situation where Jesus again reveals his masterly control of life. On the one side is a bigoted Pharisee named Simon. Sternly devoted to a religion of good taste and duty, petty rules and regulations, he invites Jesus to his home for a counseling session. One wonders if Simon hopes that he will be able to straighten out this bright but worldly young rabbi before He goes on corrupting the masses who are not keen on His new teaching. On the other side you have a prostitute. She slips into Simon's house almost unnoticed armed, not just with her kisses and tears of love, but with a whole flask of alabaster ointment. In between is Jesus. Simon is getting more and more embarrassed: "What if it gets out that a real live prostitute has been showering kisses on this radical young rabbi right under my roof!" He thinks, "Just think of it, he has the audacity to call himself a prophet; why we all know prophets don't hang around with prostitutes." While Simon is getting more embarrassed the prostitute is getting more and more emotional. The kisses, tears and ointment overflow in gratitude and love for this man who has given her back her self-respect,

and made her feel good to be a woman again. In between Jesus is unruffled, “Simon,” he says quietly, “did you hear the story about the creditor who had two debtors . . . ” and in ten seconds Simon is left speechless. And then he runs to the prostitute, “Thank you so much for coming to see me. Understand, now, your sins really are forgiven. Away, off you go in peace.” And away she goes, in peace.

So the context of the story of the widow of Nain shows then very clearly that for Luke Jesus Christ is Lord of life with all its harmony, misery and perplexity, its immorality and bigotry.

But it is the content of the story which really focuses this point most eloquently. Indeed it is interesting that it is in the middle of this very story that Luke first refers to Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord (v.13).

The setting of the event is a funeral procession literally whining its way out of the town of Nain. Up front is the band of professional mourners with their flutes and cymbals, uttering in a kind of frenzy their shrill cries of grief. Behind them is the widow, the central figure in the procession. She had had little sleep the night before as she contemplated the events of the tomorrow, which was now today. It is true that she had faced this before when her husband died. But at least then she had hope: she had her son! But this was no more. She had nothing—no husband, no son, no legal rights, no inheritance to call her own. All she could look forward to were sobs and tears and restless nights when sleep would elude her and the loneliness of a barren home, bereft of all the warmth and love it once enjoyed. Behind her is the bier—a long wicker-work basket—and on it is the corpse for all to view. Round about walk the crowd that have reverently joined the procession as it heads out of the city to the graveyard which still stands today. Then they meet the Jesus, Lord of life. Immediately he takes control as his sensitive mind feels the pressure of the heart that is breaking in the center of that procession.

And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” And he came and 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 gave him to his mother, (vs. 13-15).

We don’t know the details of what happened. What we do know, however, is that a funeral dirge had become a song of victory, a funeral procession had become a march of life, a public highway had become a highway of glory, and the Lord of life had become Lord of death! “Fear seized them all; and they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has arisen among us!’ and ‘God has visited his people!’ ” (v.16).

So we return to the twentieth century with all its bigotry, blood-thirstiness and bloody-mindedness. We know that we will face sickness and death, and cruelty to little children and rat-infested housing facilities. We will see lean faces haunted by poverty, and manly young bodies broken by war. We will preach at funerals where the mystery and darkness of suffering will overwhelm, if not break us, and we will preside at board meetings where one Christian will give hell to another Christian because they cannot agree on a color for a new carpet.

But we return with a new light in our faces and a fresh spring in our feet. For we have discovered that in Jesus Christ, God has had the last word. In His life, death, and resurrection, God's sovereign rule has been inaugurated right here in the midst of sickness, perplexity, bigotry, and death. As George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community has put it:

. . . Jesus Christ was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at the crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek . . . at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble.