

Jesus meets the people

Jesus meets the Widow of Nain

As Jesus came to Nain he met a funeral procession. A widow had just lost her only son. Now she had no means of livelihood. Jesus had pity on her in her great distress and need. He brought her son back to life.

Nain is not a village that is mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. Researchers have identified a village of that name about a day's walk from Capernaum. It is intriguing as to why or how Jesus came to that village. Did he come for the funeral because he or one of his followers knew the dead person? We do not of course know. Then as now people would travel a long distance for a funeral. In the Middle East it is essential to have an early burial because of the heat which causes a rapid decay of any corpse. Usually burial will take place on the same day as the death or the morning after the death. The burial will then be followed by several days of mourning during which people come to express their condolences to the bereaved family.

Luke gives us two important facts about the bereaved mother. Firstly her husband has already died, and secondly that the dead man was her only son. These were of course days long before the state provided any support for the poor, and at a time when a man was important as the provider of food and other necessities for the family. In what was probably an agricultural community with crops and herds of sheep and goats, it would be the man who worked in the fields and took charge of the herds. Though we are not told that there were girls in the family, this could have been the case. The mother would then have had several mouths to feed. We are not told the age of the son, but the word used to describe him in verse 14 (Greek "neaniske") is generally used of a young adult.

A common funeral scene in the Middle East is of a dead person wrapped in a large cotton cloth lying on a bed which is then carried out from the place where the person died to the local burial ground. We are here reminded that Jesus was wrapped in a cloth, not as commonly today in the West place in a coffin. Many families in the Middle East today have such a cloth ready in their home for just such an eventuality. In Arabic it is called a "kafan", which may well be related in origin to the English word "coffin". With the close family and social ties in the Middle East, especially in a village, the neighbours would all attend the funeral procession as it made its way from the home of the dead person to the burial ground. A few men would have gone ahead to dig the grave, or in the case of a family tomb cut in rock they would go ahead to remove the rock sealing it and make ready for the funeral procession.

As the funeral procession was leaving Nain that day, Jesus arrived with his followers. His followers were more than the twelve apostles, so there could have been quite a large number including the women who accompanied him on his journeys. The suspicion is that Jesus knew about the family and that it was the special circumstances that led him to particular concern and sympathy for the mother.

Jesus touched the bier and spoke to the young man. Jesus often touched, as when he healed the sick, and in particular lepers, though this led to him becoming ritually unclean. In the case of touching a corpse the uncleanness lasted for seven days (Numbers 19:11). Whether that rule applied in the case of the man who came back to life is a question the religious legal experts would no doubt enjoy debating!

So Jesus brought the man back to life with the simple instruction "get up". No long prayers, no ritual.

Luke then records "he gave him back to his mother." The Greek words are exactly the same words as those used in the Greek translation in 1 Kings 17:23 of the original Hebrew

in the story when Elijah brought back to life the son of the widow in Zarephath. A Jew reading the gospel would have immediately grasped the significance that Luke was comparing the work of Jesus to the work of Elijah. As for the people present in Nain, they too would have seen the comparison between Jesus bringing back to life the son of a widow and Elijah bringing back to life the son of a widow.

God does not change.

When I was in Africa as a missionary the baby son of the caretaker of the school became ill. By chance the next morning I read the story of Jesus with the widow in Nain and I somehow knew that God would heal that baby boy just because of his love for the caretaker and his wife. When I went to breakfast I learnt that the boy had been taken to the mission hospital early that morning and was very ill.

A week later I heard the doctor describe what had happened. She had done all she could for the baby and then gone to the capital giving up all hope of him living. When she returned she was surprised to find him alive and well. She said it was a miracle.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever.

See Luke 7:11-17 and Hebrews 13:8.

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