



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday Year C

### ***Jesus gave him to his mother***

*Readings: 1 Kings 17: 17-24, Psalm 29, Galations 1: 11-19, Luke 7: 11-17*

There are few pastoral situations more daunting for the parish priest than the visit to the family that has just seen one of their children die. Every single one is etched in my memory. The call to the hospital for the vigil by the bedside of the fatally injured only son of a dear friend. The woman weeping at the back of the church on the feast of the Annunciation, whose son had just died in a car crash hours earlier on his eighteenth birthday. The old lady of ninety suddenly undone by the death of her son of sixty. You never stop being a mother. I could go on.

These events are cruel because they seem out of keeping with the natural order of things or at least our expectations of them. We hope to be borne to the tomb by our children not the other way round. The consequences of our loss never go away. They reverberate down all our days to the moment when, if we have faith, we finally hope to be reunited with the one whose presence we have too long been denied and who has taken so much of our love and hopes and energy with him so that our focus was never quite again wholly on the present. It is not a coincidence that the death of a child often precipitates the break up of a marriage. We can never see the other now without knowing what we have lost. It is a hard

road and no-one else can quite comprehend the anguish or, thank God, really share it.

Nothing can prepare us for the shocking intrusion of mortality in those to whom we have given birth and into whom so much of the very best of who we are has been poured. They owe us nothing but without them our poverty is bleak.

On the long road south from Capernaum lies the unprepossessing little town of Na-in. Just before dusk, the Lord of Life runs headlong into the procession of death. The funeral is that of a young man, the only son of his mother and she was a widow. In that brief sentence is encompassed an ocean of tragedy. To lose a child is a tragedy of unequalled proportion. To lose an only child is an unspeakable grief. Not only that but this woman is already a widow. The two men with whom her life, her love, her hope and her future are inextricably bound. In addition to the emotional destruction of her life, her economic outlook is now dire though that will have been the last thing on her mind. There is no social security in first century Palestine. She will be reduced to penury. But first she must go to the caves outside the little town and lay her child with the bones of his father. There can be few more pitiful passages in the history of literature. And it is clearly an event that has moved the whole town for there is a great crowd with her.

As at any eastern funeral, the air will be thick with the cries of mourning. You will have some idea if you have watched the scenes of chaos and sorrow that follow an airstrike in the middle east and the shrieking, wailing, cortege that carries the flimsy mortal remains to the sudden earth.

The turning point of the story has arrived. We are told simply that Jesus saw her and had compassion. It is noted on several occasions in the Gospels that the Lord had compassion. Indeed we are told that at the sorrows of Mary and Martha at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus wept. This may seem a natural human emotion and indeed it is. The Gospellers never fail to underline Jesus' humanity. The God we know is not only all powerful but His compassion is such that He has utterly involved Himself in our humanity in order to achieve our salvation.

Jesus had compassion and tells the widow not to weep. To tell someone not to cry is a normal reaction. We may be embarrassed. We may want to cheer them up. We may desperately want their sorrow to end. All these things are normal human responses. But to tell someone not to cry at their son's funeral is frankly idiotic and deeply insensitive unless.....

Unless it is prophetic and the speaker can do something to remove the cause of sorrow.

The silence that engulfed the formerly wailing crowd of mourners must have been thick and pregnant with expectation for who knew what. This man has stopped the funeral and told the bereaved mother not to weep. Jesus moves towards the now stopped bier and lays his hand on it. The bearers are bolt upright, motionless, waiting.

Jesus addresses the corpse.

'Young man... to you I say, ARISE.'

And to the astonishment of all, the dead man sat up and began to speak.

We do not know what he said. It was probably drowned in the excitement and ballyhoo that followed but the Gospeller notes simply that Jesus gave him back to his mother.....in every sense of the word.

This raising into time is but a foretaste of what Christ can and will do for man in eternity.

The crowd, we are told, is gripped by fear and began praising God. The crowd proclaims that a great prophet has been raised up and come among them and God has visited his people. The word spreads throughout the country round about.

It is a remarkable day under the walls of Na-in and the Lord has performed His first raising from the dead. It will not be the last. But the crowd have realised something more. They have declared the presence of God with them for only God can grant life and overturn death.

But they also acknowledge the Prophet, Jesus, here and the significance of His healing is not lost on them. For it was just a few miles from here that the great prophet, Elijah, performed the miracle we heard about in the first lesson, eight centuries before Christ.

Elijah brought the resurrected boy down stairs and 'gave him to his mother'. The precise same phrase used to describe Christ's restoration to the widow of Na-in.

The prophet of God summoned the soul back and quickened the stopped flesh and restored the gift of the child, the only son of his mother. Only in

heaven will there be a drying of tears and a rejoicing in life to match these miracles. No-one in the crowd can have missed the parallel and the proclamation of the great prophet.

But there is something more and it is, I want to suggest, at the heart of Jesus' compassion. I have hinted at it in a phrase a moment ago.

Here, in the widow whose only son has died, Our Lord must have foreseen the fate of His own beloved mother on Calvary. The gift of God, held in her arms, borne in her body, pondered in her heart, followed always by her love, is taken from her and she is left, at the dereliction, to hold the broken body of all her love and hopes in her arms.

Christ foresees the Pieta, His own blessed mother, in this humble woman of Na-in and His heart goes out to her.

It is a sign. In this unnamed widow upon whom has fallen the grief of the world, is presaged the Mother of Christ, the one who is the new Eve, the mother of all who will live by her Son. As Christ gives back the son to this mother so He will give His beloved mother to every dying son who will be born to eternal life.