

Luke 7 v 11 - 17    Psalm 146

I kg 17 v17 - 24

### The Widow of Nain

Last week we heard about the faith of the Centurian, this week we have two stories, one from the old and from the new testament that tug at the heart strings and show the compassion of God for those who are in need. A compassion that we need to be reflecting in our Christian lives.

Both women are widows with a son, which was usually a tough life in Biblical times as your family didn't want you and your off spring to return to them as dependents; your in-laws rarely wanted you as part of their extended family and you had no pension to claim. You had to fend for yourself until your son could look after you. Being widowed was both a social and economic tragedy. Even if your husband had been wealthy a widow had few inheritance rights. Widows were in an extremely vulnerable economic position, and often became the prime target of exploitation. The best hope of security that a Biblical widow had was her son. For both of these women the future looked bleak as their sons die and with all the implications of that, combined with their searing emotions, any positive thoughts for the future would be impossible.

In the Old Testament the widow of Zarephath has taken in Elijah. She is not Jewish and she has very meagre supplies but Elijah, at God's request, has asked and she has supplied him with food. In fact she says, prior to the passage we have heard, that she was going to make their last meal and then die of lack of food. Elijah assures her that the God of Israel will look after her if she feeds him and God does look after her. Her jars of flour and oil always have enough to make the next meal. This is like the demand of keeping the covenant, the agreement with God; you need to give your all and in return God will give to you. By doing as God asks the widow has life as she has food (food is something that most of us take for granted), but to this widow knowing that she had enough flour and oil to make bread was everything. When her son is taken ill she fears that God is punishing her and then when he dies she is distraught (as any

mother would be). Elijah steps in and takes the dead child from her arms. He prays to God in a dramatic way and lays on the child three times. The prayer is first, then the physical contact. The child is revived and returned to his mother who acknowledges Elijah as a true man of God. The widow's faith is cemented. This is the first instance of raising to life in the Bible. The widow at Zarephath came to know God and grew in God through Elijah showing her God. As God's prophet Elijah already knew God but he may well have grown through this experience too, as he was a man in hiding, who would have known how little a widow would have, and, to ask for food from her would be difficult, but he trusted God and his faith showed God in fullness.

The account of the raising of the widow's son at Nain is only recorded in Luke. After healing the centurion's servant Jesus has walked the 25 miles to Nain. Jesus has been accompanied on this journey by a large crowd and at the gate into Nain they meet another large crowd coming out. This is a funeral procession probably being led by the widow and others have joined her as it was considered a 'good work' for Jews to accompany the dead to their burial place. As it was unlawful to bury the dead inside town walls they have to go out to the burial caves a little way outside town. Jesus followed in the footsteps of his prophetic predecessors with his concern for the plight of the widow and here He is instantly and instinctively moved by emotion.

For the mother of the young man this would have been a terrible day and Jesus sees her and immediately his heart goes out to her. He is unlikely to have met her before or even heard her story but He knows that she has lost everything and He is moved to compassion. Jesus is often moved to compassion in the Gospels, when he fed the hungry or healed the sick. It is his human nature that brings out his God given response. Luke refers to Jesus as 'the Lord' for the first time here suggesting his divinity.

First Jesus tells the widow not to cry. I don't know about you, but if I am upset and someone says not to cry as part of comforting me it has little effect, and sometimes I cry harder. Jesus then reaches up to and

touches what the Gospel describes as a coffin, but would have been a wicker palette, with the body wrapped in a burial shroud, leaving the face exposed and simply says 'young man, I say to you, get up'. At that the young man sits up and starts talking and Jesus reunites him with his mother. My tears would have turned from grief to joy.

The reaction of the crowd is that they are filled with awe and praised God, not Jesus, He is seen as a prophet who has brought about God's work. From now on everything will be different for the widow and her son. Jesus' compassion has changed their lives and restored hope. The crowd have seen and they now believe .

As Christians we believe that Jesus showed people what God is like. Whenever Jesus came across people who were sad or suffering in any way, they changed. Power and love transformed what was an 'end' into a new beginning and Jesus brought joy where there had been great sadness.

The widow of Zarepeth needed food in the first instance and God provided this through Elijah: his prayer and emotion helped to bring her son back to life. The widow of Nain had lost everything in her son's death but Jesus' stayed calm and spoke with God's authority to restore her son

We need to ask ourselves 'who are the widows of today?' Who are the people that we should be feeling compassion for and then showing our faith in action and doing something that transforms a life? Doing something that turns an 'end' into a new beginning. Sometimes it will be events that make the international news that we respond to, but more often it will be something that we do to help someone in our own community. It may not be something that we think of as 'a big deal', it may be some small act of kindness that we do, in God's name, that transforms the way a person feels or lives

Too often we feel we are too small to make a difference but I always come back to something Anita Roddick (founder of The Body Shop) said...you think you are too small to make a difference? Have you ever slept with a mosquito? Think about it. The discomfort I experience from

one bite can cause a fair amount of distraction. This is a negative difference, but with God we can make a positive difference to the lives of others. Our small gestures, acts of kindness and our prayers can mean so much and combined with the contributions of others the results can be life changing.

Let us pray that in our Christian lives we show the same compassion for others that Jesus did and by our actions show God to other people, that their lives might be changed for the better too.