

Third Sunday After Pentecost – St Paul’s Manuka – 5 June, 2016.**1 Kings 17: 8-16****Psalm 146****Galatians 1: 11-24****Luke 7: 11-17**

Today’s Gospel passage forms a pair with the ten verses that come before it and which we read last week. In Luke 7, verses 1 to 10 we read about Jesus raising the slave of the centurion from the dead and the way that Jesus was so impressed by the faith of the Centurion. This was an important message of inclusivity for the early church to hear. Jesus was saying that the kingdom of God was for all people. Now in verses 11-17 Jesus performs another miracle. Here he raised the son of the widow from the town of Nain. Both of these miracles show us that God has visited people and that this power is demonstrated in the actions and mighty works of Jesus. The story of the widow who has lost a son has much in common with our Old Testament reading today where Elijah meets a widow and shows the power of God in the never ending supply of flour and oil.

Jesus like Elijah was wandering about the countryside and now he comes to the city of Nain, a border town in southern Galilee about 30 kilometres from Capernaum. It seems that the crowd present at the raising of the centurion’s slave is still with him. They want to see more miraculous deeds done by Jesus. The disciples are there too. At the gate of the town Jesus, accompanied by the crowd and the disciples, meets a funeral procession for an only son with the mourning mother following on. In addition there is a large crowd associated with the funeral procession so there must have been a very large number of people present, some coming with Jesus and some coming with the widow. It was probably a very charged atmosphere with some expecting another miracle and others expressing their sympathy and support for the widow who was now alone in the world without any one to protect her. There is great similarity here with the story of Elijah meeting the widow at Zarephath whom Elijah met at the gate of the town. This paralleling of biblical stories was very important in the time and shows that Jesus was acting with the established power of God as revealed to the Jews in the Old Testament. God’s actions now, through Jesus, are in alignment with the past. He is not bringing a new power but continuing the saving work of God among God’s people.

It must have been a challenging scene for all concerned. Here is the dead man, the only son of the widow, being carried out and all around would know that the life for this woman would be very difficult from this point onwards since she was left alone. I think we can all feel the sadness here and identify with someone who lost someone they truly love. It for this reason that we are told that Jesus had compassion on her and so she is the beneficiary of the miracle just as much as the son.

Jesus who is for the first time in the Gospel of Luke addressed as 'the' Lord creates a sense of anticipation and action by telling the widow not to weep. It is 'the' Lord who promised action here and who then accomplishes it.

So Jesus goes forward and touches the bier or the stretcher on which the dead man was being carried. Now this was against all taboos and by doing this Jesus is making himself ritually unclean. In Jewish society it was not proper to touch a dead body and doing so could make the person unclean in a ritual sense, requiring complex procedures in order to be put right again. Jesus does not seem to care about that. His concern is for the widow and her son.

I guess the fact that Jesus touched the bier would have caused a stir amongst the people gathered there. It was a silent appeal and because of it the funeral procession would have stopped, in wonder and expectation. It is then that Jesus speaks. He says: 'Young man, I say to you, rise'. It is because of this authoritative word of Jesus that the young man sits up. His movements and the fact that he began to speak are clear proof that he is alive and fully restored and so Jesus hands him over to his mother. We can only imagine the sense of miracle, amazement and relief on the mother's part and of course on the part of the son. It is the word of God, through Jesus, that is so powerful and healing.

In the face of these sorts of events people are often fearful. People in this story we are told were seized with fear but at the same time they glorified God. Here is that rich mixture of human emotion – fear and wonder with thanks and glory. All this is caused by a strong sense that God has acted powerfully here and that power is identified with Jesus who is seen by the people witnessing these events as a great prophet, just as Elijah was so long ago. What Luke has done here is to create a further picture of who Jesus is. He has created an important category for people to begin thinking about Jesus. He acts with God's power and indeed some in the crowd may well have said: 'He is God'. All of this would have been very

meaningful to Jewish people who would have seen the power of God in all these events and know the presence among them of a great prophet.

Miracles in the Bible are events which happen in a way contrary to the regularly observed processes of nature. Miracles are not contrary to nature but contrary to what we know of nature. We know that once people die they do not live again and so when we read of the miracle of raising the young man this seems contrary to what we know even though it is not contrary to the power of God. Such power is not irrational but rather the considered power of God working among people even if we might find it hard to understand.

In the New Testament the great miracle of course is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is because Jesus rose from the dead that we hear about these miracles. If Jesus had not risen from the dead all these stories would have been lost in time. We know God's power through Jesus.

Jesus did not work miracles to dazzle people and indeed he specifically rejects that sort of thinking. Jesus worked miracles to show God's power and to show that he was God. It is through the power of the miracles that we know the Messiah and his work for us.

These miracles are signs to those who have eyes to see and to those who can see who Jesus really is. His power over nature is the sign that he is God.

We waste our time if we enter into some sort scientific search to prove or disprove miracles. This is not the way Jesus intended them to be seen. Miracles are examples of God's power with the purpose of showing us that Jesus is 'the' Lord and that Jesus works with power in mighty signs.

I think we waste our time too if we think that miracles are contrary to nature. They are not and indeed many of the most wonderful miracles I have seen are the most natural events of human living – things like love and compassion or reconciliation or the birth of a child or reaching out to someone else with healing power or the wonders of our natural world. All these are miracles, very much in harmony with nature and very much signs of the power of God.

What we can be sure of is that God comes among us in healing and power and in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is in his presence that we know the healing love of God, most fully known in Jesus' resurrection. Let us give glory to God for the miracles Jesus brings us and let us give

thanks to God for the mighty works and signs of God in our world and lives.