

Second Sunday after Trinity
June 9, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 7:11-17

The first thing that pops to mind when we hear about the miracle in today's Gospel has to do with Jesus' power over life and death. His ability to raise the dead to life, as He did with Jairus' daughter and with His friend Lazarus, demonstrates that the author of life can also restore life, even as it points to His own resurrection from the dead on the third day. But raising the only son of the widow of Nain also points to an event before Jesus had expired on the cross.

Every Good Friday we read in church St. John's Passion, the evangelist's account of Christ's betrayal, denial, mock trial, torture, crucifixion, death, and burial. St. John's is the only Gospel to record what happened to our Blessed Mother after our Lord was crucified. Jesus says to John, the beloved disciple, "Behold your mother," and to Mary, "Behold your son." This makes sense only if one holds to the Catholic teaching on Mary, that she remained a virgin throughout her life and had no other children than Jesus. What we see then is that Jesus, since He had no brothers, made sure that His mother would be provided for when His earthly ministry had ended; and we know also, then, that Joseph had died by this time.

Therefore, the resuscitation of the son of the widow of Nain prefigures what Jesus would do for His own mother as He hung upon the cross: ensure that a woman with no one to protect her and provide for her would be protected and provided for. Jesus' concern for widows, in other words, extends well beyond His concern for His own widowed mother in that it touches those who ask nothing of Him and who had never met Him.

Naturally, then, the story of the widow of Nain has important implications for how followers of Jesus are to care for the vulnerable, especially widows with none to care for them. We see, moreover, that this concern for widows extends backwards into the Old Testament. Our reading today from First Kings involves the resuscitation of the only son of the widow of Zarepheth. God's concern from time immemorial has been for the vulnerable and needy. His desire has been to see them fed, clothed, sheltered, and protected from exploitation. Both miracles we heard today testify to God's compassion for the widow.

What, then, is the Church's role in making real the compassion of God in this regard? If we look at the rest of the New Testament, we see that the order of the diaconate grew out of an argument about how much food each group of widows received during the daily distribution of goods. The Book of Acts records that the Apostles created the diaconate to care for the poor in order that they could remain wholly committed to the preaching of the Word and the spread of the Gospel. We see also in St. Paul's letter to Timothy that the Church is required to provide for what he calls "real widows," even as he encourages the younger widows to re-marry, bear children and rule their households, so that the Church has more to care for those who are too old to marry again.

From her inception then the Church has taken seriously her obligation to be the spouse of those whose spouses have died. How might we see this same obligation in action today? How can we continue in this tradition of caring for the widow, even in those cases where she is materially taken care of?

To understand the Lord's perspective in this regard, we really have to go back to Genesis, to the Scripture verses we heard yesterday at Ryan and Corin Dively's wedding: "It is not good that man should be alone." That is, we as human beings are meant to live in community, in communion with others. The communion we share is meant to endure beyond our short time together kneeling here at the altar rail. Indeed, the communion we share here is supposed to point to the communion we enjoy outside the walls of our church. No Christian, therefore, should be alone. Even if a widow happens to live alone, she must never be alone. Our very nature requires that we live in relation to other people, with other people, and for other people. To be a widow can be spiritually dangerous if it gives the impression to the widow herself that God intends for her to be alone, that others don't care that she is alone, or that now that her husband has died her obligation to her fellow man has now ceased. It is up to the Church to ensure, first, that the widow is not alone and, second, that the widow is not permitted to turn in upon herself after her beloved has passed from this life. We, her fellow Catholics, have an obligation to care for her materially, certainly, if she cannot care for herself. But we also have an obligation to care for her spiritually, to make sure that she continues to give of herself in the same way she did as a helpmate to her late husband.

What this means in a practical sense is that we remain aware of the needs of the widows in our midst, both their material well-being and their spiritual health. We don't have to knock down their doors, but we do have to make the effort to remain in regular contact with them. My point here is not to see all our widows suddenly inundated with phone calls and surprise visits, keeping in mind that the discernment of the needs of widows falls primarily on the shoulders of the clergy, just as was the case in the apostolic age. But you do know widows that I don't, Catholic widows who may not have been to Mass in a while because they have no one to take them, widows living in a fog, because they don't know what to do next now that their husband is gone. These are the needy and the vulnerable that you can reach out to, assuring them that the Church cares about their needs and that there is a place where they can find the community that in many cases, too many cases, was suddenly taken from them. We do not have the power, as Jesus did, to raise their husbands or their sons from the dead, but we do have the capacity to love. We can continue to give ourselves to them, loving them as only a husband can love his wife.

But there is one more thing to consider. When a man dies suddenly, leaving his wife alone, we are deprived of his gifts also, as surely as his widow has lost her protector and provider. If we allow the widow to drift away, a preventable tragedy occurs: the Church is deprived of the gifts she has to share with us. It is never right that we should lose from our midst two when we have really only lost one. Thus we do not forget the widow for her sake, but God would have us remember that we must remember her for our sake, as well.