

## Trinity 2 The widows of Nain and Zarephath: resurrection for the poor, at the margins and among outsiders

The story of the widow of Nain is a classic Lukan story about *the raising up of the poor*. It illustrates how, in Jesus, the vision of Mary in Luke chapter 2 is fulfilled – that God has “lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things.” It also expresses the outworking of Jesus’ own proclamation in Luke chapter 4, in the synagogue at Nazareth, that, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” As a widow in her society this woman of Nain is vulnerable. We assume that there was no one available for re-marriage i.e. no suitable relatives, as re-marrying would be the expectation. However, so long as her son is alive, she is safeguarded and will be looked after. When he dies, she is immediately at risk of both poverty and exploitation. Therefore, when Jesus raises the son, restoring him to life, his actions are commonly taken to denote his supreme act of securing the widow’s wellbeing for the future – of raising up the poor. We are told that, “when the Lord saw her he had compassion on her,” and that when the son sits up and begins to speak, “Jesus gave him to his mother.” Her future is assured. She has a new lease of life.

The connection of this story with the story of the widow of Zarephath is striking. Both stories are about widows who are vulnerable and whose children die and are raised. And the story of Zarephath points us towards a scriptural tradition of multiple stories about prophets raising the dead. As well as Elijah and the widow’s son, there is the story of Elisha raising the son of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings chapter 4. In the gospels, as well as the widow of Nain, there is the raising of Jairus’s daughter and the story of Lazarus. Jesus is to be viewed, says Luke the storyteller, in the long tradition of prophets sent from God, who do the work of God, in this case safeguarding women, widows and the poor. When the widow of

Nain's son is healed, the people who witness it give voice to this tradition exclaiming, "a great prophet has risen among us! God has looked favourably on his people!"

There is also an interesting reference to Zarephath in the account of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4. Here, after Jesus proclaims his mission and all the eyes are fixed on him, he goes on, controversially, to announce that he is not accepted as a prophet in his own town. This sets up another key dynamic of the gospels, that Jesus is characteristic of other prophetic figures in that he is often received better outside his own community than within it. To substantiate this, Jesus cites the example of how the great prophets Elijah and Elisha were singularly more effective in their prophetic ministries outside the community of Israel. "There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah," says Jesus, "yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon." Similarly he points out that, just as "there were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." Sidon and Syria are foreign territories, yet these are places where deep faith is found, where prophetic witness is recognised and received. Jesus' words of course make the people very cross, and they escort him out of the town to throw him off a cliff, but he walks through the midst of them and goes on his way. The point Luke is making, and which will be illustrated frequently in the gospel, is that not only will Jesus reach out to the poor, but he will be received often most generously, and may himself be most effective, among people outside his own community of faith. We are being prepared here for meeting other key gospel characters, the centurion and his servant, the Good Samaritan and the grateful Samaritan leper. We are being introduced to a fundamental feature of Jesus' teaching that he points people, and us, towards recognising and acknowledging faith in unlikely people, and as we would say now, people of 'other faith traditions'. And some of us witnessed a fine example of this recently at Stephen Barton's funeral when one of Stephen's former colleagues at the

chaplains in the Womens' Hospital, a female Muslim chaplain, gave a very gracious and moving address. This was in addition to a generous tribute also from Rabbi Margaret Jacobi. Having noted this outsider dynamic, interestingly, the widow of Nain is not an outsider in this religious sense, but most probably an insider to the community of faith! Nain is a village six miles south east of Nazareth so, without being told differently in the text, we assume that the woman is Jewish. Here, arguably, the alternative point is being made, that within a short walk from Nazareth, where Jesus is rejected, faith can be alive and well, and Jesus can indeed be both effective and well received within his own faith community or nation. The gospels are never one-dimensional!

In the story of the widow of Zarephath there is an interesting twist to the notion of faith being found on the margins and outside the known community. Zarephath is in Sidon which is a foreign place. It is also the place where another notable woman comes from who sits at the centre of the narrative in 1 Kings. This is Queen Jezebel, daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, the wife taken by Ahab the King of Israel. As we know, the effect of Ahab marrying Jezebel is that he chooses to worship the God Baal and builds an altar to him; which does not please God or Elijah. After Elijah then takes on the prophets of Baal at the altar and defeats them, it is of course Jezebel, in a fit of jealous indignation, who threatens Elijah with death.

What is set up in the narrative is an interesting comparison between the two women of Sidon, the widow of Zarephath and Queen Jezebel. Whereas the widow is an exemplar of faith, who follows Elijah's instructions risking everything she has, so Jezebel represents everything antithetical to faithful living. The widow is of course a genuinely marginal character while Jezebel is far from it. The contrast between the two women serves to emphasise that the widow of Zarephath as a marginal character and an outsider of faith is being held up as someone, supremely, through whom God can work. This is the sort of context where we should expect to find God at work.

The story of the widow of Nain is quintessentially a Lukan story. It prioritises women, it expresses Jesus' outreach to the marginal and it is about the raising up of the poor. The story is found only in Luke's gospel. It is also a story about resurrection, as we note in this post-resurrection season, pointing us towards the triumph of Jesus over the grave. In so far as the story combines the features of poverty with misfortune and distress, it has a deep, if sombre, ring of truth about it. This is the territory and testimony of many urbanites, including in our own parish. Yesterday's peace walk in Ladywood, for example, which was very successful, reminds us that deprivation or marginality combined with alienation can lead to very self-destructive behaviours and lifestyles, often with associated violence. In respect of gang cultures there are very sadly many bereft parents, siblings and indeed widows. What the story of the widow of Nain suggests to us is that in the middle of the entangled circumstances of urban life in our city, there is the reconstructive dynamic of resurrection forever rising up to re-empower and renew people. Birmingham is fortunate to have benefitted from the work that Alison Treasure (currently with us at St George's on placement) has been doing, with others, to address some of these most pressing urban issues. We pray fervently for experiences of resurrection in the city that will bring hope to broken communities and people who are hurting deeply. Amen.

1380 Words

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