

it's about us
a sermon preached on the
3rd Sunday after Pentecost
5 June 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: 1 Kings 17:17-24, Psalm 30, Galatians 1:11-24, Luke 7:11-17

Christian faith is always at risk of descending into mere superhero worship – which is in fact nothing other than idolatry. A gospel story such as today's increases that risk: the spectacle of the raised son of the widow of Nain can so easily promote the idea of *Jesus as the point of the story*. This is not so far from the cult of celebrity – latent in the dramatic stories about Elijah which scholars agree lie behind Luke's gospel story¹ – in which the whole world now bathes.

Worse, it's only a few steps from there to imperial conquest, scalp-hunting, and persecutions and slaughter – in the name of devotion to the cult of Jesus. As many have observed, the stakes in our time are greater than ever before. W C Dix's 19th century imperialistic hymnody² – our processional hymn today – rather graphically illustrates the degree to which devotion to the cult of Jesus and empire have got mixed up. Contemporary songs sound more 'modern' than the 19th century hymnody, but are often just as prone to reinforcing an imperial cult of celebrity Jesus.

But Christ came not to attract attention to himself: he did not come to be a religious cult celebrity. That is to misunderstand both the meaning of the revelation in Christ and the essence of true 'worship'. Rather, Jesus gestures towards that greater Reality into which all persons are to participate:³ 'we all share in the one bread'.

It always helps to ask the question: What has this text of Sacred Scripture to do *with me*? What has the raising of the only son of the widow of Nain to do with me – here and now, in this life, at this time, at this place? That is to be reminded of the fact that the Sacred Scripture is not primarily an historical event which proves some tribalistic ghetto's point about its cult celebrity hero. Rather, that the Sacred Scripture is a timeless metaphor for the eternal truths about what it is to be fully human, to be fully daughters and sons of God.

Thus, the Sacred Scripture is timeless metaphor that empowers us, to reflect upon that direct revelation of the mystical Christ that is given to each of us – just as it was to St Paul – through the uniqueness of our experience. This requires taking our own experience as seriously as we value Sacred Scripture. St Paul was as well acquainted with Sacred Scripture as anyone – indeed, he claims, better than most⁴ – yet it is clear that he placed the highest possible trust in his personal, direct experience of the mystical Christ.⁵

Let us, then, apply this same standard to our reflection on today's gospel. There are (at least) five different angles through which the story can be approached.

Let us start with the son. We know nothing about him except that he almost dies. For reasons which are beyond him – and for which he himself can claim no credit – life which is almost taken away, is given back to him. Have any of us had such an experience, of the precariousness and sheer gratuity of life? The story's about *us*.

Turning to the mother: as a widow she is one of the most vulnerable in the culture of the day. Without a husband she has no means of support. Her son is her only hope for an income. His death equals total and permanent destitution, a situation of utter despair. Have any of us had such an experience of despair? The story's about *us*!

Then there's the disciples. They imagine that their Master is going to bring in a glorious kingdom. They cannot understand why he is spending his time and energies on society's unclean outsiders, misfits, and irrelevant. How on earth is this going to deal with the perceived

¹ 1 Kings: 17-18

² 'Hallelujah! sing to Jesus', William Chatterton Dix

³ Luke 17:21

⁴ Philippians 3:4-6

⁵ Galatians 1:11-12, 16-18

enemy (the Romans)! Has any of us ever had this experience, of feeling frustrated that energies are being ‘wasted’ on society’s ‘worthless’, that *our* goals are not being accomplished? It’s about us.

What about the crowds? The evangelist will make it painfully clear that crowds are self-interested, bedazzled by spectacle – the ancient term is idolatry; a modern term might be ‘mass-minded unconsciousness’. Have we ever been caught up in mass-minded unconsciousness? It’s a story about us.

Finally, there’s an invisible group in this story also: the religious establishment, those hidden behind the scenes, ‘pulling the levers’ of the society. Beneath their veneer of respectability, they are in fact culpable in the widow’s destitution, through their self-serving commitment to a distorted form of purity that benefits them, to a legalism and their own power and possessions. Have we ever allowed our self-interested commitments to prevent us from the priority of the guts-turning compassion⁶ that commits itself to justice?⁷ It’s about us!

Such reflection can free us from idolatry and mere superhero worship of an historicised, externalised, supernaturalised Jesus – and shifts attention to our own lives, inner and outer. Beneath the superficial detail – which we are so prone to getting stuck on – *what are the spiritual issues of our lives?*

In what way/s have *we* almost died: and how is it that life has been given to us in spite of the fact that we did not ‘deserve’ it?

What is the particular nature of *our* despair: and how is it that we have been met, despite all expectations, at precisely the real point of our need?

Anxious about proving our accomplishments and self-image, how is it that the mystical Christ takes us to the people and the places we consider worthless, and to accomplish what *we* did not plan?

In what ways is Christ revealing to us our complicity in mass-minded unconsciousness: our propensity to be bedazzled by spectacle, celebrity, ‘popularity’, and ‘success’?

Finally, in what ways does our complicity as the well-groomed and powerful establishment foster economic and social injustice?

By such reflection on, and commitment to, our experience we open ourselves to the spiritual issues facing us, to eternally present mystical Christ – performing the work of resurrection in us; our spirituality comes to transcend the cult of celebrity, as we are becoming fully daughters and sons of God. And we won’t need to ‘bang our drum: for *in us* others will recognise that God has visited God’s people.⁸

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⁶ The Greek verb **σπλαγνιζομαι** *splagnizomai* literally means the turning of the inards. Luke 7:13

⁷ Luke 7:12

⁸ Luke 7:16