HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 10 YEAR C

5 JUNE 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

While at times we might like it to be otherwise, miracles, such as the raisings from the dead reported in today’s first reading and in the Gospel passage are not panaceas for the righting of all human wrongs, pains, sorrows and evils. They cannot be delivered on demand, they are not ends in themselves and they resist subjection to (in modern terms) NHS or any other form of target setting. They do not overcome the capricious and accidental randomness of human life: Jesus himself comments that the people upon whom the Tower of Siloam fell were not greater sinners than anyone else. They cannot be pressed into service and delivered on tap to prove points – so Jesus condemns his (and every generation) which longs for a sign. They are never universal solutions. Jesus himself comments elsewhere on today’s first reading: Do you not think that there were many widows in Israel in the prophet Elijah’s time but he was not sent to one of these but to a widow in Zarephath, a Sidonian town. Miracles are irreducibly particular and personal, necessarily rare and they have a purpose within them, which points beyond themselves. To be sure they encourage and lead to faith and come from faith but above all it is the faith that is important. In the book of Daniel when the three young men are threatened with fire, they profess a faith in the God who can save them from the fire, but they add *even if he does not*, they will not bow down and worship the golden statue.

In today’s gospel we hear of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain. It is the second of two miracles which take place in this part of the gospel of Luke, quite early in his gospel, the first being the healing of the Gentile centurion’s servant then this raising from the dead. The centurion makes an elaborate and humble request of Jesus through intermediaries, leading Jesus to say ‘not even in Israel, have I found faith as great as this’. The centurion expresses his abject need: ‘Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but only say the word and my boy shall be healed’. The widow of Nain by contrast in our passage is too prostrate by grief to utter any words and, as we heard, Jesus performs this raising miracle, not because of her faith which is not expressed – in fact she says nothing and we hear nothing of her reaction at all in the passage, but simply because Jesus has compassion for her, whose grief and groaning cannot be put into words. Both these two miracles lead up to the very next story in Luke’s gospel when the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus to ask ‘Are you the one to come or are we to expect another?’ Jesus replies that they should return to John and tell him that the sick are cured and the dead raised.

As very often with Jesus’ miracles the point of the passage comes very much less in the healing or raising miracle, though clearly that is integral and instrumental but in the reaction of either the person or the bystanders. In the raising of the son of the widow of Nain it is the witnesses ‘Everyone was filled with awe and praised God saying ‘A great prophet has appeared among us; God has visited his people’. These are the same precise words given to Zechariah at the outset of the gospel of Luke: ‘Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel for he has visited his people’ and ‘he has raised up for us a power of salvation’. I want to say something about this last phrase ‘has raised up’. The English in the lectionary obscures it a bit, but it is in fact the same Greek phrase that occurs in the Benedictus, then twice in today’s Gospel. Jesus says to the dead man ‘get up’ or better ‘be raised up’ and the people say ‘a great prophet has appeared among us’ or more literally ‘has been raised up’. And then at the end of the gospel of Luke, it is the same word in the mouths of the angels in the tomb: ‘He is not here, he has been raised’. Not in fact ‘He is risen’ but ‘He has been raised’ – the divine passive because raised by whom? Raised, of course, by God. ‘A great prophet has been raised up among us; God has visited his people’.

In the vocabulary of resurrection there tends to be these three stages: to be raised, to be upstanding, to be exalted. The only son of the widow of Nain points to this but of course only partially: Jesus tells him to be raised and he sits up and begins to speak, but we are not told what he says. Jesus too will be raised up and he will stand up and he will be exalted by God and therefore in praise by his people. In the final words of the gospel of Luke the disciples were constantly in the Temple praising God. This is anticipated in today’s gospel by the words of the crowd ‘A great prophet has been raised up among us; God has visited his people’; the voice of the raised son, whose words we do not know, disappears into the voice of the crowd praising God, who has come among them. What is *seen* is that a dead man has been raised; what is *believed* is that God has come among his people; vision disappears into faith.

A raising from the dead does not of itself produce faith and transform our lives. Jesus will himself say sadly in Luke’s gospel of the family of the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus ‘they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead’. For us in our daily lives the way into faith and into the transformation of our lives is to share in the compassion of Jesus, who looked in compassion on the grief stricken widow. Our hearts will expand and we shall find a voice to join in the song of praise. It is just a hint in today’s gospel but it is set out clearly enough and in a most down-to-earth and direct way in today’s Mass texts. In the opening prayer: ‘grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it’. In the prayer over the gifts ‘[may] what we offer .. be an acceptable oblation to you and lead us to grow in charity’. In the prayer after communion ‘may your healing work, O Lord … lead us to what is right’. Responding to God’s grace and the prompting of his word, we are to go out in love to others and in love God comes to visit us, to heal us and to raise us up, giving us power to sing a song of joy and praise.