

The Gate of Nain

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: There's an old saying about not being able to see the forest through the trees. The idea is that we sometimes focus on prominent details and end up missing the big picture. This morning's Gospel reading is a case in point.

It's the very brief account of the first time Jesus raises a person from the dead, which you've got to admit is an impressive miracle. So, naturally, that's the detail that stands out. We hear the story and think, "Wow, Jesus is sure something. He can bring the dead back to life." On the other hand, we know that Jesus is God. He can do anything. And we've heard lots of his miracle stories. So it's easy to glean this one detail – Jesus can raise the dead – and think that's all there is. Nothing else to see here. Might as well move on to the next story.

But I'd like you to see the bigger picture. There's more going on here. Though the resurrection miracle is admittedly a great big tree, the way St. Luke tells this story indicates that he wants us to take in the panorama of the forest also. So let's do that. Let's mentally step back and broaden our view. When we do that, we'll see what we've got here is the head-on collision of two processions of people. They're moving in opposite directions. One is heading out through the gate of the city of Nain; the other is coming in. And the two parades meet right there in the gate – at what is a fairly narrow point of constriction. It's a passageway that forces more or less single file traffic, or at most the passage of people two or three abreast, either into or out of the city. So there's no way for both of these knots of humanity to pass through at the same time. One of them must give way.

The out bound column is a funeral procession. It's gloomy and mournful. At its head is the deceased: a young man who until very recently was in the prime of life. He's laid out on a stretcher-like bier and being carried, probably at shoulder height, by half a dozen or so of his former friends. Immediately behind the elevated corpse follows the sole surviving family member: his mother. She walks alone, weeping inconsolably—not that there's anyone who would dare to *try* to console her, for she is a widow, and this was her only child. A large crowd of townsfolk follows at a respectful distance. They maintain a solemn silence. They are truly sympathetic because they understand the tragedy of this situation. They know that not only has she lost the one person she had remaining in this world to love and cherish, she's also lost whatever hope she has for security and happiness in the future. In that age there were no such things as social security, retirement plans, senior centers, and assisted care facilities. Instead, families took care of their own. And so what she would have done, had her son survived, was to go on living with him. No doubt she would have made herself useful in the home, cooking, cleaning, making and mending clothing for her son; and, when he married, she would have had the joy of helping to raise her grandchildren. And the family in turn would have provided for her as, over the years and due to advancing age, her duties became lighter and her need for assistance increased. But the point is that she would have belonged to a family. She would have had a place to live and love and laugh and be part of something greater than herself. That future is gone for her. The best she can hope for now is to hire herself out as a servant for some other family ...which means miserably low wages and being treated as an inferior rather than a family member ... and only *if* she can find such work ... and only *while* she is still able to work ... and after that? Well, that's the big question, isn't it?

The crowd of sympathizers understands her piteous position only too well. And they are genuinely sorry for her; but the simple truth is that no matter how sad they feel, they cannot

share her loss. The heartbreak and misfortune are hers alone to bear. The crowd grieves with and for her; but this public display of emotional support is about as far as any of them are likely to go. They have their own lives to live, their own families to think about. And the sudden shock of this death only underscores how precarious their lives and livelihoods are. The young men carrying the body are surely thinking, "He was my age. One day he's fine, everything's going well, his whole life's ahead of him—and the next day he's gone. It could be me up there. I might be next. Who knows? And where would that leave my mother, or my wife, or my children?" Similar thoughts are passing through the minds of everyone in the crowd: "What would happen if such a death were to strike me or some member of my family?" Or "What if it were something short of death: an injury, a disability, an eye infection that led to blindness, a stroke ... what then?"

And of course, the question is not merely one of "what if", but "when". Tragedy and loss strike every family sooner or later. And back in those days the mortality rate was the same as it is today: one hundred percent. Everyone in the crowd knows that one day that *will be me* being carried out through the gate of the city of Nain. And if it doesn't happen to me first, I'll be one of the weeping family members walking behind the body of someone I love as it is being carried out. But through that narrow passageway we must all be carried one day.

And with that in mind, I'd have you see what this group represents. It's the persistent procession of death. It's the unrelenting, mournful march toward the narrow constriction of the grave that we're all headed to. It's led by a pale, cold corpse, followed immediately by tears and heartache, and in its wake there's a long trail of fear. And every one of us is in the crowd. There's no escaping it: we're all heading toward the gate of Nain.

That's the sad procession heading out of the city. The one coming in to where people *live* is happy and upbeat. It is led by Jesus, who is the Author and Lord of Life. He too is on a steady march. It's one of Luke's main themes as you go through his Gospel: that Jesus is moving forward undeterred; he's a man on a quest with a definite goal in mind. He knows where he is going and what he must do. He is followed by his disciples and a long train of enthusiastic devotees who are rejoicing in the message and work of their Leader. They are filled with messianic hopes and dreams for the future—a future *life*. As it turns out, the actual *content* of their hopes and expectations is mistaken at this point; but that's only because they're thinking too small. They're thinking in terms of the temporal and earthly—it's all their minds are capable of at the moment; but unbeknown to them, their true goal far exceeds anything they can imagine. Following Jesus, they are on the path to that leads to eternal life in glory.

So watch what happens: as I said before, the two processions are moving in opposite directions. And the collision takes place right at the city gate. Jesus meets the body of the deceased precisely at the narrowest point. Now, ask yourself what *should* happen. Normally, out of respect for the dead and those who are mourning, you would expect the people coming in to step aside. That's the way we do things even today: we pull aside and let a funeral procession pass. It's the polite thing to do. And if you consider the crowd following behind Jesus, you can see how one minute they'd be marching along laughing, joking, singing – remember, the funeral procession is still in the city and can't be seen from the outside. It's just as they come up to the gate that they see the body being carried out. And then a sudden hush falls on them. It ripples back from the front of the column to the end where rubber-neckers are trying to see what's up ahead and asking, "Hey, what's going on? Why are we stopping?" And immediately they're being told, "Shh! It's a funeral. They're taking someone out for burial. Show some respect."

But here's the kicker: Jesus doesn't step aside. He stands face to face with the pallbearers and forces them to stop. In the narrow gateway, they can't get around him. So imagine what they're thinking. "Who is this guy? And how can he be so insensitive and ill mannered? Who stands in the way of a funeral procession?" The answer is that Jesus does. He has no respect for death. He understands that death is the enemy, the enemy he has come to defeat. He's here to face death and turn back its steady march. He's here to reverse it.

The pallbearers don't know that. Their minds quickly move from initial shock to anger at this unbelievably inconsiderate stranger. And that gives way to another kind of shock as Jesus does something even more unexpected. He reaches out and places his hand on the bier. That's something you didn't do in those days. The Law of Moses said that anyone who touched a corpse or anything immediately in contact with a dead body was to be considered unclean for a certain period of time, which meant exclusion from the worshipping assembly. So unless you absolutely had to, like if you were immediate family and had to help prepare the body for burial, or if you were a pallbearer, you gave a dead body a wide berth. No one would ever think to defile himself by touching the corpse of someone unknown.

No one, that is, except Jesus; but then, he knows everyone, doesn't he? What's more, he's family. He makes himself so. And that's why he acts. Unlike the rest of the crowd behind the grieving widow who only *feel sorry* for her, we're told that Jesus is moved with *compassion* for her. The Greek word Luke uses literally means to be gut wrenched. It's that heavy, sinking feeling you get deep in the pit of your stomach when you witness something terrible happening to someone else. You really do feel for them. And it's worth noting that it's the widow who is the object of Jesus' compassion rather than her dead son. She's the one whose situation arouses in Jesus deep emotion and concern. And it makes sense: it's only the *survivors* who lose something when someone dies in the faith. It's strange that we often see it the other way.

But now Jesus looks into the eyes of this desolate woman. What does *she* see? A man she doesn't know, but with a look that says, "I understand. I know what you're suffering, and I want to take your pain away." He tells her, "Don't cry." And when he says it, somehow it really does help – though she doesn't understand how that could be. Her situation hasn't changed; not yet, anyway. And there's no way she can know what's coming. But somehow just his speaking to her fills her with a sense of comfort and security.

Then comes the resurrection itself. Jesus simply speaks to the lifeless body, "Young man, to you I say, arise." And the living Word of the Lord makes it happen. The departed soul returns to its home in the body at the command of Christ. And immediately the young man sits up and starts to speak. ... I wonder what he said. Apparently it's not important that we know. What's important to know is that the Word of Jesus gives life to the dead.

And he stops the procession of death. Think about it: now there's no reason for the crowd heading out to the cemetery to keep going that way. They turn around and go same direction as Jesus now. They go back to their homes – to the places where they *live*. And Jesus gives the young man back to his mother. He reunites those whom death has separated. He returns to them their loved ones. And friends, if he can restore relationships that death has destroyed, do you imagine for a moment there's any other human relationship he can't repair?

What I would have you see, then, is that this story, as brief as it is, summarizes the whole purpose of Jesus' ministry. This is why he came: to turn back the menacing march of death, to give life to the dead, and to restore hopelessly damaged relationships. And if you're

with me in this notion that the gate of Nain stands as an image of death and the grave, then this story even tells us *why* and strongly hints at *how* Jesus is going to do it.

How? By facing death head on. Jesus will stand in that narrow place through which we all must pass and allow our death to come to him. He'll reach out, embrace it, and allow himself to be defiled by it. And as a result, he'll be excluded from the assembly of God's people – condemned as a sinner and driven out like one who is unclean. And then he will lead a procession of death – not being carried by others – but rather *carrying for* others the cause of death: our sin – our sin in the form and shape of his cross. This burden he will bear alone. And there will follow him a great crowd: a handful of confused sympathizers who are weeping because they do not understand, and a much greater crowd of mockers and revilers who are rejoicing in his suffering. And why will he do this? He'll do it all because he has compassion on us, because he wants to take away our pain, our losses, and our sorrows. He'll do it – he'll face our death and the punishment we deserve – so that we can live, so that we can have returned to us our loved ones, and so that we will never have to face death again.

At least, not like we did before. Sure, in the short term, while we live on this earth, we are still part of part of that out bound procession heading for the gate of Nain. If Christ does not return first, then one day every one of us will pass through it. But because Jesus stood in that narrow place for us, because he became defiled by bearing our sin and its curse of death, and – let's not forget – because he rose again to prove his victory over death—because of all this, we can face all of our passages through the gate of Nain, whether for ourselves or for someone we love, like the people in the story who were following Jesus from the beginning, for that is what we're doing if we trust in him. These are the people who were looking forward with great hope and expectation for life with Christ in his kingdom. And now we know what they didn't: that this is an eternal kingdom where we will live forever in fadeless glory and splendor.

So this is it: because Jesus stood there and faced death for us, the gate of Nain has become something not to be feared or wept over like those who have no hope. And that's strangely appropriate, for the word *Nain* means *pleasant* or *beautiful*. For followers of Jesus, that's what the grave has become: merely a narrow passageway from this vale of tears to the beautiful and pleasant place where people really *live* now and forever. Certainly that's the way the Lord sees it, for as the psalmist declares: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." May we see it that way too. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!