

THE EMMAUS SERIES

10th Sunday Year C

1 Kings 17:17-24

Galatians 1:11-19

Luke 7:11-17

A great prophet has appeared among us

In today's gospel passage, Luke continues his account of Jesus' Galilean ministry, spreading the Good News of the Kingdom. The story he recalls is a very striking one, and Luke tells it with a sensitivity that moves us each time we hear it. As he enters the town, accompanied by a large crowd, Jesus was confronted by a tragic funeral procession. The only son of a widow was being taken for burial. Moved with compassion, Jesus comforted the unfortunate woman, and stopping the procession by putting his hand on the bier carrying the dead man, he called him back to life, and 'gave him to his mother'. To understand fully the pathos of this incident, we must recognise that this widow's situation was a desperate one. She faced more than the loss of her son. In the patriarchal society to which she belonged, the loss of her only son left her without the support of a male relative to protect her interests.

But Luke wants us to find more in this story than evidence of the compassion of Jesus. Immediately after describing this incident, he recalls the messengers who came from John the Baptist to ask Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come?' To this question Jesus replied by reminding them of the signs spoken of by the prophets, signs that would announce the coming of the Messiah: 'Tell John what you have seen and heard, the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor' (Luke 7:22).

Luke is presenting Jesus as the final prophet of God. In the traditions of old Israel, both Elijah and Elisha restored to life the sons of widows. We hear of Elijah's miracle in today's first reading. What a contrast between the desperate efforts and prayers of Elijah – in many ways the paradigmatic prophet of the Old Testament – to bring the child back to life, so that he could 'give him to his mother', and the sovereign authority with which Jesus performs the miracle in his own name: 'Young man, I tell you to get up'. More than that, he displays an authority that is greater than that of the prophets of the Old Testament – in that his compassion led him to disregard the ritual prescriptions of the Law, which made one who had contact with a corpse 'unclean'.

In this miracle, Jesus demonstrates his invincible power over Death, 'the last enemy to be destroyed' as Paul tells us (1 Cor 15:26). He is anticipating the ultimate triumph of his Paschal Mystery. Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians – recalling his sharing in Christ's triumph, when God 'called him through his grace, and chose to reveal his Son to him' – reminds us that we can all know the compassion of Jesus, as he shares with us his triumph over the reign of death.

John Thornhill sm