

Sermon at the Eucharist

Pentecost 2; 6 June 2010

The Dean of Newcastle, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney



Some years ago the Church of England issued a DVD to all parochial clergy entitled 'Hope in the Church'. It was basically the Archbishop of Canterbury and the then Archbishop of York, David Hope saying 'Chin up, don't despair'.

I remember the DVD not so much for its message as for its delivery. It came so well packaged that it smashed the letter box in our front door as the postman tried to push it through. I briefly thought of sending the repair bill to one or both of the Archbishops but I didn't want to discourage them.

My experience of the delivery of the DVD paled into insignificance beside that of another clergyman who happened to have a broken arm. He bravely or foolishly decided to open the DVD in his keenness to get some encouragement. He wrestled his way through the external shrink-wrap; the firmly sealed envelope, the next layer of plastic wrapping and finally opened the case to discover that he had been sent an empty box. Hope, he remarked, had fled.

Today's gospel, in which Jesus raises the son of a widow in the town of Nain reflects the story of Elijah in this morning's Old Testament lesson who, after providing food for the widow in Zarephath raises her son from death. The conjunction of the stories tells us something about Jesus as a prophet – and more than a prophet, and about the power of the word of God to bring hope.

In the continuation of this morning's Old Testament lesson Elijah raises the son of the widow: we can presume that this is her only son. This miracle by Elijah is prompted by a desperate rebuke from the woman. 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!' The lament of the widow from Zarephath comes after Elijah has given her hope.

Facing starvation her life choices have dwindled and diminished: 'I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.' Elijah promises her if she will think beyond the confines of her own predicament, if she will commit a daring act of generosity then: '...thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth'. This morning's Old Testament lesson directly invites us to consider what constitutes the tipping point between self-protection and generosity? A powerful theme that emerges from this story is the belief that our hospitality to others may not only help the other,

but actually be responsible for our own survival. This is an important lesson to consider in the church at this time.

Paradoxically, faced with the threat of having nothing the widow responds to the invitation to give and as a result shares in the life-giving generosity of God: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail

At the start of the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, which we will encounter on Sundays in the coming weeks, the writer emphasises that the word of the Lord, that which the prophets utter, is what controls the events to come. The word has its own power beyond any power or influence belonging to the prophet himself. The prophets participate in a mystery that lies behind and under the events and words of their lives.

Our gospel reading, Luke 7:11-17 obviously parallels the story of Elijah raising the widow's son. Luke's introduction to the woman is very rhetorical.

As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town.

The detail 'and she was a widow' intensifies the tragedy of her situation: a widow who loses her only son has lost all sources of protection. Widows were notoriously poor and vulnerable and this one has lost one last avenue of support, her son. One can imagine grief for her son but also for herself. Luke probably wants us to see the story as typical and representative. Jesus responds with compassion. He raises the dead to life because that is what he has come to do - to raise people from death to life, to make possible new beginnings.

At a literal level, as the story was probably first understood, this is simply a miracle, an exercise of divine power. The crowd responds with what the first storytellers will also have had in mind, by declaring Jesus a prophet like Elijah, One important difference in the gospel compared to the story of Elijah is that Jesus speaks directly to the dead son and raises him, thereby going beyond the role of a prophet. Another critical point in the gospel occurs when Jesus gives the young man back to his mother. That is the moment when the widow herself is raised from death.

The story reminds us of the power of the word of God lived out in action and it challenges us to ask ourselves how often do we prefer being dead to being obedient to that word. The story reminds us that in the midst of the complexity of human need hope survives along with the possibility of renewal and life.

Hidden in a world that rushes headlong toward oblivion, lost in the steady progression of a funeral procession is a new life-giving age. Like that crowd long ago in the village of Nain, we see the superficial, not the substantial; the prophet, not the messiah. To our world, the church might be a useful organization for social welfare, the maintenance of the moral life of our community, and the visible marking of our

life-stages. What our world doesn't recognize in the church is the gift of life itself. Instead we rush onward believing that a person's life is found in the abundance of their possessions or the richness of their experiences. As at the gateway of the town of Nain the life-giving Jesus is recognized as a good man, a prophet maybe. Few see, few recognize the bondage of death, let alone the possibility of release from its captivity to eternal life.