

10th Sunday of the Year (Cycle C)

(1 Kgs 17:17-24; Gal 1:11-19; Luke 7:11-17)

As we read today's first reading I could see there were two questions you were all eager to ask: that is, Where is Zarephath? and why is Elijah staying there with a widow? I see that all of you are nodding! Well, I knew you would be asking me and I didn't have a clue, so I prayed to Elijah for enlightenment. He came to me in a dream last night and said, "First of all, I don't like that 'Why were you staying with a widow woman?' business. It sounds kind of accusatory and judgmental." "Oh no," I said "I had nothing like that in mind." So he proceeded, "Zarephath was a town in Sidon, part of Phoenicia--what you now call Lebanon. It was a time of drought and therefore of famine. I approached this widow woman and asked for a small piece of bread. She said, 'All I have is a little flour in a jar and some oil in a jug; I was just going to prepare it for my son and myself; after that we will starve to death.'" So I said, prepare it for you and your son, as you have said, but first make a little piece of bread for me. I am a prophet and I declare, **A**thus says the Lord, "the flour in the jar and the oil in the jug will not be diminished until the day the Lord gives rain upon the earth." She seemed very doubtful, so I said, "Look, when the great Messiah comes he will immortalize you for this; he will say, 'there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread

over the entire land. It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow of Zarephath." So the three of us were provided with food for as long as the famine lasted.

"And why did you go to a widow in Zarephath instead of to one in Israel?" I asked. AThat's a longer story, but simply told. Jezebel was promoting the worship of Baal, the god of fertility, in Israel. His worshipers thought that through his obscene rites they could promote fertility. Into this scene I strode and proclaimed, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, during these years there shall be no dew or rain except at my word." Then I departed. So there was a drought, and consequently, famine--and the rites of Baal accomplished nothing. Of course everyone in Israel was trying to get their hands on me, so I fled to Sidon. Israel had extradition treaties with all the other nations, so I had to lie low.

Well, I thought, all this was very enlightening, but it wasn't advancing my homily, which I intended to be about the gospel. The obvious connection between the first reading and the gospel is the raising to life of the dead son of a widow by Elijah. Elisha, Elijah's disciple, also raised from the dead the son of a grieving mother. It could be that the miracles of these two prophets explain in part why, when Jesus raises the son of the widow of Nain, the people acclaim Him as a prophet. If so, that is where the similarity ends. Jesus does not share the violent proclivities of these prophetic predecessors. When Elijah returned from Zarephath to Israel, it was in order to challenge the people

to sanction a contest between himself and the 400 prophets of Baal: the prophets of Baal would call upon Baal, and Elijah would call upon Yahweh, and the one who answered with fire, Israel would know is God. The prophets of Baal failed miserably, and Elijah, the victor, slit their 400 throats. (He was not very ecumenically minded.) Twice, when the king sent a captain and 50 men to summon him, Elijah called fire down from heaven to consume the captains and their 50 men. Elisha, Elijah's disciple and successor, incited Jehu to usurp the kingship in Israel, knowing he would assassinate the king of Israel, then go on to arrange the death of Ahab's 70 grandsons, have Jezebel thrown to her death from a high window, and slaughter all the worshipers of Baal after he had enticed them into the temple of Baal.

Jesus *was* a prophet, but it certainly wasn't in the mold of Elijah and Elisha. When James and John wanted to call fire down from heaven on a Samaritan town that would not receive them, in the manner of Elijah, Jesus rebuked them. Jesus did not see humankind as divided into two hostile camps. When the disciples wanted to prevent someone driving out demons in Jesus' name, because he was not of their company, Jesus said, **A**Do not prevent him; whoever is not against you is for you. @

In today's gospel we don't have a typical miracle story. No one implores Jesus on their own or another's behalf. There is no demand for faith, nor any reference to faith at all. There are only the tears of the desolate mother

taking her son for burial. Jesus sees the tears and His heart is moved to compassion.

As so often, St. Luke is able to move us by depicting Jesus' compassion. St. Luke, of all the gospels, most beautifully depicts the loving tenderness of Jesus. St. Luke it is who tells us the stories of the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, and the rich man and Lazarus, and he alone, in the parable of the good shepherd has him return the lost lamb to the flock by carrying it on his own shoulders. In St. John's gospel, we know, the miracles Jesus worked are told with much detail, and each one becomes a "sign" of great significance. Thus in the story of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus waits three days after the urgent plea from Martha and Mary and then tells His disciples that Lazarus is dead. When He encounters Martha, He tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live; and everyone who believes in me will never die." And asks her to believe. Whoever has had to console someone for the death of a loved one is eternally grateful for those words. And we know the whole episode is intended as a "sign" that Jesus gives life to the dead--not only to Lazarus, but to all who believe.

We would not detract in any way from the this important episode in the career of Jesus, yet this does not detract from our gratitude to St. Luke for today's gospel, which illumines another aspect of Jesus' love. Unlike the event in John, in which Jesus waits until Lazarus is dead so He can raise him, this one appears completely spontaneous. Jesus is on the road when He encounters the funeral

cortege. Jesus sees the mother's tears, is moved to pity, and He acts. "Do not weep," He tells her. And then the simple, "Young man, I tell you, arise."

We can be grateful that we have four gospels. Each one presents us with a different facet of Our Lord's character and activity. One of Luke's special contributions is to show in wondrous ways the compassionate side of Jesus; how impoverished we would be without it. What is more, it is a side of Jesus we all can try to imitate. We may not be able to raise the dead to life, but there are many other ways in which we can bring comfort into the world. One way in which all can exercise compassion is be ready with forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness that doesn't hold others hostage because of past injuries. Jesus forgave Peter, He prayed for those who put Him to death, and none of us have suffered that kind of injury. How good it is to remember that every word of comfort we speak is a way of imitating Jesus, and sharing with Him the roll of Supreme Comforter.