

Luke 7:11-17

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 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. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favourably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Jesus responds to the need of a widow, whose only son has died (7:12) and has compassion on her (7:13). Luke's inclusion of the detail that this was her only son highlights her difficult situation. Without a husband and now without any son to support her, it is very likely that she is now or will soon be financially destitute. Luke's shaping of the story suggests that her sole means of support has been taken from her. Luke emphasizes that, when Jesus sees *her* situation, "his heart went out to her" (7:13). Three times Luke inserts the feminine pronoun into this single verse. Jesus' compassion is fuelled by the widow's plight. In the ancient world much more than in contemporary Western settings, it was the case that people's children were their retirement. Jesus' compassionate restoration of this widow's son may have meant the difference between survival and destitution.

The conclusion to this healing story is important to Luke's theological message. First, the crowds are filled with awe and praise God, saying, "God has come to help his people" (7:16). Jesus' healing actions point to God's restoration now begun in Jesus. Luke frequently highlights responses of the crowds to Jesus' healing activity.

The crowds also affirm, "A great prophet has risen among us!" (7:16). An important part of Luke's Christology is his portrayal of Jesus as prophet. And as we highlight for the church today Luke's portrait of Jesus as prophetic Messiah, centre stage is Jesus' care for the most vulnerable in society - here a widow without children and so without means of support. And as Luke systematically connects the church's ministry to Jesus' own mission, we have the evangelist's mandate to exhort our churches to embrace compassionate ministry to the poor in Jesus' name.

(Jeannine K. Brown)

Psalm 146 (a psalm of praise)

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help and hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow; but the way of the wicked is brought to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever, for all generations. Praise the Lord!

Psalm 146 is part of the crescendo ending of the psalter. It begins and ends with "Praise the LORD" (an envelope called an "inclusio") which contain 2 doxologies surrounding two stanzas. The first doxology is personal and enduring, better translated as "I will praise God with my whole self". Praise of God is often an act of discipline. Praise is not the result of external happiness but rather that despite the external situation, God is still worthy of praise. The ancients knew that such praise changes the world by transforming and empowering individuals. Crying to God is an important cathartic, but praise can change our outlook. Praise gives power when we feel powerless. The first stanza then changes direction abruptly. We are not to place our trust in humans, even human leaders be they good or bad, for they will come and go and all of their plans will go with them. Human plans are small and transitory. Life-long praise and trust are reserved for the LORD alone. The next stanza returns focus to the one praying. It opens with the Hebrew *'asher*, often translated as "happy", but really meaning a deep abiding "contentment" with the human condition and one's God. And what a God we serve! God is Creator of the heavens, the earth, and the seas. God is the Sustainer who keeps faith forever. The psalm adds five ways of the LORD, all centred on God's justice. One can imagine that as each line is read or sung, it is followed by a resounding response of praise. The psalm concludes a final doxology celebrating God's enduring presence in the world and a final shout of "Hallelujah." *(Beth L. Tanner)*

1 Kings 17:8-16

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; 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 said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For 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." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "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!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

Galatians 1:11-24

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Paul's authority has been questioned and he is mad about what is happening in Galatia, where people had turned away from the gospel he had presented to them. They had been swept off their feet by new fundamentalist preachers, who upheld scripture to the letter and so insisted that the Galatians must be circumcised, as Genesis 17 requires. They saw Paul's mission which excused Gentiles from circumcision as a sell-out of the truth. The accusation was that Paul was making faith easy, and seen as a betrayal both of scripture and of Israel. What lies at the heart of faith? Is it grace with freedom to remove barriers, (including biblical ones if need be), or is it law enshrined in a fundamentalist attitude towards the scriptures? These issues confronted Paul everywhere he turned, dogging him throughout his ministry. His willingness not to lie down and submit, but to assert at great cost what he believed to be true has left us the rich legacy of his letters. Central is his conviction that faith sets people free and that this has a transforming effect which goes far beyond what meticulous observance of laws, including biblical laws, can achieve. For Paul, faith is not human and derived. It is divinely inspired. *(Bill Loader)*