

8th October 2017  
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18th After Pentecost Luke 3

The Yew tree is a wonderful thing; it can last for a thousand years. Its branches can grow downwards and become rooted in the ground. They can take on, then, a life of their own and become younger Yew Trees growing around the parent-tree. Eventually, they can form a circle of trees around the dead tree in the centre. No wonder the ancients must have thought of the Yew as magical and mysterious; they are often found in English graveyards in country churches: symbols of eternity, perhaps but, like everything else, even the ancient Yew does not last forever.

Everything in this life, of course, is transient; even the oldest of things passes away. We are, perhaps, overwhelmed by the impermanence of all around us. As the scripture says, *the form of this world is passing away* [1 Cor.7:31]. Yet, most of us would dearly wish that our familiar worlds would just *go on and on*. Even in imagining life beyond the grave, many have conceived of it, at the very least, as being reunited with loved ones; that what we know will somehow just continue.

This might well be so but from our perspective, through these eyes of faith, that is not all it must be, for such a vision sees no development, no growth; no becoming, merely remaining as we are. In which case, what is it all for?

The widow of Nain in today's gospel has been suddenly confronted by this passing nature of life. An early death having taken away her husband, has now carried off her only son and she is left with no means of support. Did she presume, at least, that in the natural course of things, she would die before her child? Perhaps she did but few things in an ever-changing world are so certain.

So she moves off, walking alongside the bier, with a few relatives, maybe, arguing whose responsibility she is now to become. And there are neighbours alongside, duly observing the time-honoured rites of burial, wondering if any of their own would be next:

a dismal procession, emerging from the little town, as a sad and sluggish stream, channeled away from the great River of Life.

These people from a town six miles south-east of Nazareth, are people of the Old Testament: a faith itself revealed in impermanence; one founded on God's promises to the patriarchs which must, in time, fulfil its purpose and become no more, once the fullness of the gospel had come - for who still goes on expecting, once a promise has been kept? But the Old Testament is about life, life in *this* world and for *this* world.

Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, tells the children of Israel to choose life by choosing to be loyal to the LORD God of their fathers. The temple in the earthly Jerusalem was the centre of their worship; their offerings were from what was grown in the earth or the livestock from their fields. Their sacrifices and lustrations purified the body; their ritual observances and even the very food they ate separated them as the people chosen by the LORD for His own from all the peoples of the earth. Their father Abraham had been given the promises and Moses had brought the Law and the prophets. They had this land but it was now just a province, a part of a great empire with strange gods.

Yet even here, in the Old Testament faith, they could see beyond the passing nature of this life. Read again the nineteenth chapter of the book of Job, where there is vision of something beyond this temporal life and the sufferings that must inevitably follow. The chapter reads like Ps 88, one the six psalms that we use at Orthros - the only psalm of suffering that ends in darkness, without resolution or with blessing the LORD. But in Job there is also a hint of something better to come:

“Oh, that my words were written!  
Oh, that they were inscribed in a book!  
That they were engraved on a rock  
With an iron pen and lead, forever!  
For I know that my Redeemer lives,  
And He shall stand at last on the earth;  
And after my skin is destroyed, this I know,

That in my flesh I shall see God,  
Whom I shall see for myself,  
And my eyes shall behold, and not another. [Job 19:23-27]

St Jerome refers to this passage as the clearest indication of the resurrection in the Old Testament. And then it happens: the immovable object of death meets the irresistible force of Life itself. Two processions come face to face, for Christ is come from Capernaum where, the day before, He had healed the centurion's servant. And He is come with His disciples and a great crowd of curious people, expectant, excited, wanting to see something, seeking blessing in this life or perhaps, something more.

And the end of this encounter, this meeting of two streams, two processions, we know well. This corpse of a young man, this latter-day Job, becomes himself the fulfilment of Job's prophesy and he beholds his Maker and Redeemer, with his very own eyes. For a time the impermanence of life is halted and he is returned to his mother.

Here, we must be very careful in our understanding, in the interpretation of this incident and its significance. It is indeed an act of pure compassion, as the Greek verb used in the text, *esplagchnisthe*, makes clear, translated into English as *had compassion on*, it is connected with the word, *splagchnon*, meaning the inward part, the entrails, intestines which for the ancients were the seat of the emotions and feelings. Nowadays in English, people are more inclined to use the phrase *heartfelt*, seeing the heart as the site of the emotions but this is to debase the biblical idea of the heart as the centre of the self. But here is our Lord, truly moved, a human love as well as a divine compassion, in His two natures

But beyond this remedy, albeit a temporary resurrection in a particular situation, for let's be clear: this young man would have to face death again - the fuller meaning of this story in the gospel is to be found elsewhere. Following on from this incident, The Forerunner, John the Baptist sends his own disciples to find out whether Jesus is really the Christ or should they to expect another? And our Lord tells them: "*Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the*

*blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them.[Lk.7:22]*

Yes, we might look for, even pray for comfort, healing, stability, even continuity, in this life but that was not the longed-for homeland of the holy martyrs, nor the End sought by the great ascetics. We must see these miracles of Christ for what they truly are: not just solutions to our temporary problems, for the time being but rather, signs of life in the eternal kingdom. Do miracles of healing still happen, do the blind still see, the lame still walk and are the lepers still cleansed? Of course they are; there are wonderworkers among the saints of God but not to keep us fixed here. Rather they are as signposts, directing us beyond this fallen and suffering world. Yes, indeed, they will help us in our weaknesses and struggle through the uncertainties of a passing age but they are principally to assure us and confirm within us the life of the kingdom of God.

As is one of the prayers recited by the priest quietly at Vespers affirms, *'O God, great and wonderful, who with wisdom inscrutable and great riches of providence orders all things and bestows upon us earthy good things ; who has given us a pledge of the promised kingdom though the good things already bestowed upon us...'* So this is what is happening in the gospel story today: a foretaste of the kingdom to come.

Is this not the same with us, we too, who like that widow's son have already died once, in a mystery, sacramentally, spiritually, in baptism and have been raised to a new life in Christ? We, who already in a mystery, receive today the bread heaven, the mystical supper of the Lamb, even though the kingdom is yet to be revealed in all its fullness, even we are called not to fix our hearts here, for nothing here, even the venerable Yew tree, is permanent. And even those whom we have loved, as I have said before, those whom we have had to let go, even they in Christ will be restored to us in as much as we fix our own hearts on the kingdom of heaven.