

YOUNG MAN, I SAY TO YOU, ARISE. Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 7,11-17

Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her.

And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!”

And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

The episode that we now read and comment is found only in Luke’s gospel. It is absent in the other gospels. Even if it is a clamorous and dramatic case. Let’s see what the evangelist writes. “*Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain,*” Nain is a small town found 10 kilometres south of Nazareth. And it never appears in the books of the Bible, in the Old Testament.

Its name has a popular origin and means “graceful”, that which is pretty. “*...and his disciples and a great crowd went with him.*” So the evangelist presents us with this procession of Jesus going to this town followed by his disciples and a great crowd. As a contrast the evangelist gives us another procession. While Jesus and the great crowd arrive to the town another procession exits, a procession of death.

The evangelist presents the contradiction between these two processions. In fact ... “*As he drew near to the gate of the town,* (it was a walled town) *behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only*

son of his mother,” It is an absolute tragedy, for a widowed mother to lose her only son means she has no man to provide for her, for her subsistence and her economy, her very life.

Therefore it is not only the death of the son, but the danger from the life of the mother. And many people from the town were with her. The evangelist, writing this episode, without doubt thought of the famous episode found the first book of Kings, when the prophet Elijah revives the dead son of the widow of Zarephath.

“And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her...” It is the first time in Luke’s gospel that this expression appears “to see and to have compassion” that is exclusive to God. While in the Jewish language man has mercy, it is exclusive for God to have compassion because to have compassion means to communicate life’s energy, to restore life to whom that does not have it.

Three times this expression of compassion appears in Luke’s gospel, the first time here, the second in the parable of the good Samaritan, when he sees the unfortunate victim he has compassion. So Jesus attributes to this man, thought to be the most distant from God, the same sentiment and divine action. And the last time in the parable of the Prodigal Son when the father seeing the son and has compassion, to that son thought dead the father restores life.

“..and said to her, “Do not weep.” Here there is a particular that surprises *“Then he came up and touched the bier,..”* Why does Jesus touch the bier? It was not necessary. For the action that he does... let’s read *“...and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.”* Jesus could have said this without touching the bier. He could of said simply “Young man, arise!” Why did Jesus touch the bier? Because it was forbidden.

If one touched the place of the dead he became impure. So according to the second book of Numbers, chapter 129, 11-16. It is forbidden to touch the bier.

So what is the meaning that the evangelist gives us ? That the transgression of the law at that time was thought to cause the death of the individual, for Jesus the transgression of the law is that which caused life. Here is why the evangelist presents this Jesus that transgresses the law touching the bier, when it was not necessary

“Young man, I say to you, arise.” It is an imperative that Jesus uses. *“And the dead man sat up and began to speak..”* Talking is the certain proof of the return to life. *“...and Jesus gave him to his mother”* Here the action that the evangelist presents us is not so much that Jesus addressed to the son, but how much towards the mother. It is the mother that, with the death of her son had lost all hope of life.

The characters are anonymous and when in the gospel the characters are anonymous it means that they are representative. Through this episode the evangelist does not illustrate a simple fact of the news, but a much deeper truth. Who is this mother that has no hope because the son is dead? It is the population of Israel. The population of Israel that finds itself without hope. Well, Jesus is the one that can restore life and hope to this population.

Let's see the peoples reaction. *"Fear seized them all,.. "* (there is a divine action in progress) *"..and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!"* Why this exclamation ? Because it was believed that prophets did not still exist. God was so angry, offended and irritated with his people, that there were no more prophets, those who communicated their wishes and desires.

There is a psalm, 74 that in verse 9 says: "We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long." Therefore it was a cry from the people. So they see that the communication between God and humanity through Jesus has begun again. This is why they recognise Jesus not only as a prophet, but as a great prophet. He does not only announce God's will, but communicates the same divine life.

".. and "God has visited his people!" At the beginning of his gospel in the Song of Zechariah, there was written that God had visited and redeemed his people. So here the people understand that this visit of God's through Jesus is to bring to the full liberation. And the evangelist concludes:

"And this report about him spread..." (literally this message) And what is this message? That in Jesus the hope of life can be rediscovered. In Jesus the certainty of the future can be rediscovered, Jesus had assured the future of this family and this widow.

"And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country." The communication of life that Jesus had done for the son of this widow, and which should be interpreted just like the hope of life that Jesus made to all the people, spread throughout Israel.