

## **Cancel the Funeral**

### **Luke 7:11-17**

So we've taken a break from Luke over the Easter period. But we're back into it again this morning. And as I said a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the account of Jesus' intervention in the life of the centurion, Luke has put this Chapter 7 together to help answer the question – who is Jesus? Remember, Luke is writing, first of all, to Theophilus, who was most likely a member of the Roman educated elite. And Luke is writing this so that Theophilus and everyone else who reads this book, might have certainty about the things he's been taught. And right at the top of what he needs to be certain about when it comes to Jesus is 'who is he?'

Well, in the account of Jesus healing the centurion's servant, we saw that Jesus is a man under authority – a man sent from God, with God's authority, who just has to speak the word and sickness flees. But that centurion's servant, Luke tells us, was only at the point of death. He hadn't yet crossed the line. His life was hanging by a thread, but it was still hanging. This next story presents the case of this young man who has crossed the line. How long his life was hanging by a thread for, we don't know, but that thread has broken and when Jesus meets his mother, he's dead.

### **The Compassion of God**

So Jesus moves on from Capernaum and heads to this small town called Nain. But he doesn't go alone – his disciples are with him, but so too is what Luke calls a great crowd. You can imagine Jesus walking at the head, or towards the front, with all these people following him, or surrounding him.

But as they approach the main gate of the town, Jesus' crowd meets another large crowd coming out of the gate. And there are very different atmospheres in these two crowds. One – Jesus' crowd - is full of life, with a kind of party, carnival atmosphere: Jesus is on the move, God is doing a new thing, and they've just seen the centurion's servant get healed. But the other is a funeral procession. And the difference could not be more stark. It's life, meeting death at the town gate. This is joy meeting mourning face to face.

And Luke gives us the details we need. The funeral procession is carrying the body of this young man. He was his mother's only son, and she was already a widow. Given the burial customs, he had likely died that same day, and they were carrying him on a funeral bier, an open stretcher, with his body wrapped in a shroud, to bury him. And this dead man's mother was heartbroken, and she had every reason to be.

You see, she's a very different person from the centurion we saw three weeks ago. For one, he was a man, and she's a woman in a patriarchal culture. He had at least some measure of power and authority, and he was a man of influence, a man of means: he could afford to build a synagogue, and the elders of his town went to Jesus to argue his case, so he's got friends in high places. But she is very different. It's unlikely she has friends in high places, and now, with both her husband and her son dead she is alone – with no-one to fight her corner, no one to advocate for her. She faces a very uncertain financial future and many in her situation would end up begging on the streets.

She's a widow, her son has died and she's very much alone. She has every reason to weep. And the town turns out in large numbers to share her grief. They know what her boy's death means for her. No doubt they're glad it wasn't them.

And these two crowds – life and death – meet outside the gate, and it would have been easy for Jesus simply to let this crowd pass, to not be bothered by this woman weeping. After all, she can't give *him* anything, and he's at the head of this great new movement. He's got a party atmosphere going and you don't want to spoil that with talk about death.

And yet Luke tells us in v13 that 'when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.' And you don't get it in the English, but in the Greek that compassion is linked to your guts, your innards. This is deep, gut-wrenching, feeling that Jesus has for this woman. It's pity that you feel. Jesus feels this woman's pain and her loss on the inside, he's moved deep down by pity for her.

Now this sense of God's compassion towards his children is a theme running right through the Bible. And more than anything else, if you look in your Bible for what it is that stirs God's compassion, what it is that moves God to this depth of feeling for his people, it is the ravaging effects of sin on their lives. It is when they realize what sin has done to them and the result of their turning away from Him, and they turn back to Him. And Moses and the prophets say it's in that realization of our need for God and our coming, turning back, that God's compassion, this heart-wrenching, love of a father goes out to His children.

That's why when Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son, returning home, coming back to his father, having wasted his life, and squandered his inheritance, Jesus says 'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt *compassion*' – not some nice, sweet, emotion-lite thing, but this heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching, felt emotion – my boy is coming home – 'and ran and embraced him and kissed him' (Luke 15:20).

It is God's deep compassion for those whose lives have been wrecked by sin. And the Bible makes it clear that death is *the* ultimate destructive effect of sin. Not your individual sin, but as Paul says in Romans 5:12, that death came into the world because of sin, and spread to all men because all have sinned. And so here is another lady, a widow, burying her only son; another victim of a world gone horribly wrong, another life mangled by sin and devastated by death, and Jesus has compassion on her. She has no male protector or provider left in the world and Jesus steps forward to become that man.

But he doesn't just do that for her. He does it for you. Your circumstances may be very different from hers but we all feel the effects of sin, in your own life and in the lives of those you love. And the prophet Micah, who wrote hundreds of years before Jesus, caught just a glimpse of what God was going to do and said, (Micah 7:18-19), 'Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on

us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.'

Micah saw that in God's compassion, this deep, gut-wrenching love for his people, God would bring about the ultimate solution to the ravaging effects of sin. And Jesus doesn't simply show us God's compassion – he is God's compassion, come to finally do away with sin, and destroy all its effects, because He loves His children. And Jesus has come so that who ever turns to him – whether you're not yet a Christian and for you that's the first time, or whether you're already a Christian but you're turning to him again in repentance, that whoever turns to him might know the Father's love and depth of compassion as that prodigal son knew.

But here is this widow weeping with the town around her and her dead son beside her, yet another victim of sin and death, and Jesus steps forward to do something about it.

### **Death is Conquered**

So Luke tells us in v14 that Jesus 'came up and touched the bier.' Now, as I said this is a stretcher, a plank they're carrying, with the young man's dead body wrapped in a shroud on it, and everyone can see it. And Jesus touches this bier, which would have made him ceremonially unclean, touching something a dead person was on, but we've seen already in Luke when Jesus healed a leper, that he doesn't shrink back from supposedly becoming unclean – he's come to become unclean that we might be clean, and Jesus touched the bier and the men carrying it stand still, and every eye in these two crowds is on Jesus.

And Jesus simply speaks to the dead man: 'young man, I say to you, arise.' And he does! And Luke says in v15 'and the dead man sat up!' And I think doctor Luke is having a bit of a laugh, because he knows and you and I know that dead men don't sit up, dead men lie still and cold, but not this dead man, not a dead man who Jesus speaks to. But rather than say 'the man who *was* dead sat up', Luke says 'the dead man sat up.' This young man, still wrapped in his funeral shroud sits up in full view of everyone and starts talking. He's a sitting up, talking sort of dead man. A dead man, who's dead no longer. Luke doesn't tell us what the young man said, probably because no-one could make it out under all the layers of cloth wrapped round his face, but I suspect it was Aramaic for, 'will someone get me out of this!'

And then Luke tells us that Jesus gave him back to his mother. And what must she have thought? What must the emotion in that place have been like! JC Ryle says of this event: "though death, the last enemy is mighty, he is not so mighty as the sinner's friend!" And Jesus, the sinner's friend, who feels this deep gut-level compassion for those whose lives sin has mangled, speaks across the chasm between life and death, and calls this young man back, and commands him to live, and the young man sits up, and Jesus gives him back to his mother. God, in His compassion is undoing the life-destroying effects of sin.

But, as some of you well know, it doesn't always have a happy ending in this life. Even for this family, it was just a temporary reprieve. We don't know how long this young man lived for but the day surely came when he would have had to bury his mother and the day would come when his children would bury him. And right up to today, lives are still trashed by sin and loved ones still die. So if this account is more than just a nice story, where is the hope and help here for us?

Well, as Jesus steps forward, and moves from this crowd of life to that of death, he's putting his cards on the table. The last enemy, death, is living on borrowed time. Someone greater is here, someone who can break the power and the stranglehold of death over us.

My father died 20 years ago and my brother and I were asked by the undertaker whether we wanted to join the party of pall-bearers who carried my dad's coffin into the church for the funeral. We said we did and so we stood on a warm day with the sun shining as the undertakers pulled the coffin out of the hearse, and we lifted the coffin together and set it on our shoulders, my brother and me at the front. And as we began making our way from the road into the grounds of our village church where he was to be buried and I was struggling to keep my emotions together, I looked up, just as we were going through the lych gate, the covered gate way at the entrance to these old village church graveyards, and there carved into the wood across the top beam were the words of Jesus from John 11:25 'I am the resurrection and the life'. And you don't know what that does for you, the strength that gives you, when you feel the weight of death on your shoulders! And as we entered the church and the congregation all stood, the minister walked in front proclaiming those same words: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." And those were the words Jesus spoke to Martha, the sister of Lazarus, before he raised Lazarus from the dead. And when you know them, and believe them, the weight and the fear of death vanishes as a mist.

In the 1920s Eugene O'Neill wrote a strange play based on the story of Lazarus, called 'Lazarus Laughs.' Having been raised from the dead by Jesus all Lazarus can do is laugh, and the more he laughs, the younger he becomes - I told you it was strange! But the Roman emperor Caligula, who is going steadily mad, wants to learn the secret of everlasting youth, and when he meets Lazarus he threatens to kill him, just as he has massacred other Christians, and summarizing it badly, Caligula says to Lazarus - 'don't you know that I could kill you, don't you know that I am Caesar and have the power over life and death', and in response Lazarus just laughs! You see, how could Lazarus be afraid of a mere tyrant like Caligula, when he knows that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He knows that death has lost its sting, and nothing can make him afraid. He can laugh in the face of death. And you and I can face it with hope!

You see Jesus raising this widow's son is just a fore-taste, it's just the first green shoots of spring of what Jesus is going to do to death. And in John 6:44 Jesus says, 'No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up at the last day.' And through his own death and resurrection Jesus

has defeated our two greatest enemies: sin and death. And offers us the promise of new life to come in the final resurrection.

Now, I don't know how you respond to that, maybe Lazarus did laugh, but Luke tells us how this funeral crowd responded:

### **God has visited his people**

v15-16: 'The dead man sat up and began to speak... Fear seized them all.' Their initial response is fear. Literally fear took hold of them, fear seized them. And you can understand why, when the dead body starts moving and sits up. One hospital I worked in as a junior doctor had its mortuary in a separate small brick building round the back of the hospital in a little wooded area. And because of the kind of hours we worked sometimes I didn't get to certify a death until night-time, and going there alone, in the dark, it was pretty spooky! Every noise was magnified - every creak of the trees, or the door squeaking on its hinges, would send my heart racing. I couldn't get in and out of there fast enough. But if one of those bodies had stirred whilst I was there, I'd have jumped out of my skin.

And that's how they respond. Fear grips them - they have the shock of their lives - but not for long. When they realize there's no spookiness here, when they see this young man being given back to his mother, they move from fear to glorifying God. And the funeral procession turns into this spontaneous praise party. Because there's no longer a funeral to go to.

And what this crowd says is fascinating - v16: 'a great prophet has arisen among us!' You see they know their bible, and they know that Elijah, the archetypal Old Testament prophet himself, raised a widow's son and gave him back to his mother just like Jesus did. And they see that stuff is happening in their day equivalent to what was happening back then. A great prophet, a prophet like Elijah, has come. But Jesus is more than just a great prophet. And though they didn't know the full implication of what they were saying, this crowd was more right than they knew when they said 'God has visited his people.'

You see, God has indeed visited his people: to turn back the power of sin and death. And ultimately he does that by allowing Jesus, *his* only son, to die that you might live. This widow has *her* only son brought back to life by Jesus. But to give us life, God gives His only Son over to death. His life for your life, God's only son, for this woman's son. But in that giving over to death, the power of sin is broken, and through His resurrection the doorway to eternal life is opened for you.

And the picture of this funeral procession turning into a praise party is just wonderful. What a picture of what Jesus has come to do! They go from mourning, to fear, to glorifying God for what Jesus has done. And whilst you and I don't need to experience fear the way they did, nevertheless you and I can move from being in the crowd on its way to a funeral, to one celebrating new life in Jesus. You can transition from a sense of joyless formality to one of heart-felt praise. And you do that as you begin to understand what it is Jesus has done for you. When that dawns on you, that God has visited his people, you realize there's no reason to stay in life's funeral cortege any longer. And you realize, that there is ample

reason to glorify and magnify God for his victory and grace and compassion to you in Jesus.

As we finish, listen to the words of Isaiah the prophet from Is 61:1-3 – the words Jesus takes up as his mission statement at the beginning of his ministry, it's his heart for each one of us: 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion – to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.'