Sermon for 10th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: 1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17.

i

To be a widow in the world of the Bible was to be a woman in potentially deep trouble. This is because a woman could not inherit her husband’s property which went to the nearest male relative. So a widow usually became dependent upon one of her sons. If she had no son she could return to her father’s house, but if her father was dead too, she was destitute and reliant on the charity of the local community unless she could quickly re-marry.

The bond between a mother and her son or sons was crucial for women. Husbands have always tended to die before their wife, so the mother-son relationship actually provided a woman with her life-long security, rather than her marriage.

Both the widow of Zarepath and the widow of Nain, though separated by about 850 years, are facing the same predicament. What on earth is to become of them now their only son has died?

Elijah understands the woman’s plight and in the name of his God is able to perform the miraculous raising of her son from death. God is often said to be the special helper of widows. No wonder; they needed it.

Jesus is clearly moved when he sees the widow of Nain following her only son’s dead body to the cemetery. Was Jesus struck with anguish at the thought of his own widowed mother who would be deprived of the support of her only son when he went to his death?

One of the last acts Jesus made before he expired on the cross was to provide his mother with a new son, the disciple John. Does such an act support the idea that Jesus’ other brothers mentioned in Mark 3:31 really were Mary’s step-children, brought by Joseph from an earlier marriage? The majority of Christians would say so.

Or does Jesus’ offering of John to his mother Mary and the offer of Mary as mother to John carry greater significance than simple social security, as Catholics believe? For Catholics, Mary is being offered as a Mother figure for the whole Church.

Whichever line we take, it seems incredible that Christians have taken so long to recognise the legitimate rights of women to equality.

Just as Paul sends the slave, Onesimus, back to his master, because the Church could not have survived at that time if it had been perceived as a revolutionary emancipation movement, nevertheless, the principles of the Gospel lead conclusively to the abolition of slavery.

So Paul may advise that men are the head of the household and wives should be subservient for similar reasons of prudent tactics to meet the social conditions facing the infant Church in his day, but it is Paul who proclaims that in Christ there is “neither male nor female.” Priscilla instructs Apollos in Acts 18:18-26, Lydia (Acts 16), Euodia and Syntyche were female leaders of the church in Philippi (Phil 4:2) and Phoebe the deaconess leads a list of prominent men and women leaders in Romans 16. So Paul was not the total misogynist some make him out to be.

The manner in which Jesus interacts with women, notably the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) and the woman caught in adultery (John 8), and Mary and Martha (Luke 10) clearly breaks the social norms of his day.

For Methodists, this means that just as there is no explicit condemnation of slavery in the NT, the principles of the Gospel lead conclusively to that position, so too women may be subservient to husbands in some passages of the NT, but other passages point us conclusively towards equality and that includes women’s ordination.

Yet in far too many Christian households the world over, women are still dominated by their men and in too many cases live in fear of stepping out of line. That is a disgrace to the Gospel we proclaim.

ii

The second matter I wish to draw from today’s readings is the sense of guilt that is so often associated with misfortune.

When the widow’s son dies, she says to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”

Her words are nearly 3,000 years old, but they could have been spoken today. How many times when disaster strikes do we hear that s/he “didn’t deserve that.”

Jesus refutes such ideas in reference to the collapse of a tower in Jerusalem which killed 18 innocent bystanders, saying, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!”

The whole point of Jesus’ ministry is to bring justice to the world. In the world people do not “get what they deserve” on any regular basis. The world is “unfair,” but the Good News is that “God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed” (Acts 17:31).

“What I have done to deserve this?” is a familiar complaint heard on the lips of many who face pain and misfortune. The answer is - “quite probably nothing at all.” It is cruel to add to a person’s misery and pain by supposing that their calamity is somehow deserved.

Sometimes we do make silly or misguided choices and may on occasions “get what we deserve”; sometimes we courageously put ourselves in danger for the sake of others or for a great cause and have to face the inevitable consequences. But in so many ways and in so many circumstances we do not get what we deserve – hence the apparently “wicked” can flourish and the apparently “innocent” can suffer.

Ultimately, the balance will be put right, each one getting what he or she deserves, but justice, when it comes, will be meted out by a loving heavenly Father, through his only Son who gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

iii

This brings me onto my third and last point – note how mercy and life have the final say when God is at work.

Elijah has taken refuge in Zarepath because of the continuing drought; he is also keeping a low profile from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of Israel against whom Elijah says God is sending the drought.

Elijah has taken refuge in Zarepath for a reason. It is in the region of Sidon, the birthplace of Jezebel and the very centre of the cult of Baal which Jezebel is introducing to Israel through her marriage to Ahab.

In the first place, Jezebel’s home territory is the very last place she will think to look for him, but secondly, it enables Elijah to make a theological statement that is reinforced in more brutal ways in the following chapter on Mt Carmel.

The widow has been extraordinarily kind to Elijah, taking him in, a foreigner worshipping a foreign God, and feeding him even though her own resources for herself and her son were pitifully meagre.

Firstly, her kindness lies behind her sense of grievance that she should be punished by Elijah’s God when her son dies. We all know it’s wrong, but we all instinctively think God owes us something when we manage to do a few things that are right and good.

Secondly, it shows to the zealot wing of Judaism that goodness is not confined to any particular race or religion. That’s a useful message for all zealots of today too, whatever their affiliation.

Thirdly, it seems clear that the widow knows it is no use calling on Baal for help. The possibility does not seem to arise. So when Elijah raises the dead son in the name of the God of Israel, he is demonstrating the supremacy of his God over Jezebel’s Baal, who is not even capable of winning the day on his own turf. Mt. Carmel’s murderous confrontation follows in the next chapter.

The story of Jesus raising the widow of Nain’s son evokes the story of Elijah in the Gospel writer’s mind.

Nain was a small town in Galilee not that far from Nazareth. We recall that Nazareth proved hostile territory for Jesus’ mission and his visit there nearly cost him his life (Luke 4:29). Was Nain possibly equally hostile? Or was it receptive like Capernaum?

We hear of no other events in Nain that suggest it was a place that welcomed Jesus’ preaching and healing ministry, so that might suggest it was cool towards him at best.

The point is that Jesus doesn’t hesitate to help: even if Nain is unfriendly towards his mission; even if the son or his mother has been a notorious sinner. The instinct of God is to show mercy and to restore life. That is the Gospel in action.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard - May 2015**