

## The Miracle at Nain

**Sermon preached by The Rev'd Robert Wheeler at St John's  
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**The miracle stories in the Gospel all contain teaching that is most helpful for us as Christian. This can pass us by if we get stuck on the questions: "Did it happen? What really happened?"**

**In the fourth century St Augustine may be found complaining that hearers of the Gospel miracles frequently got stuck on the 'worker' element. He said: "Let us ask the miracles themselves what they tell us about Christ, for they have a tongue of their own, if ti can only be understood. Because Christ is the Word of God, all the acts of the Word become words to us. The miracle which we admire on the outside also has something inside which must be understood. If we wee a piece of beautiful handwriting, we are not satisfied simply to note that the letters are formed evenly, equally and elegantly: we also want to know the meaning the letters convey. In the same way, a miracle is not like a picture, something merely to look at and admire, and to be left at that. It is much more like a piece of writing which we must learn to read and understand."**

**The raising of the widow's son is only found in St Luke's Gospel. The story begins with two processions.....Jesus, his disciples and many people were moving together towards the city or town of Nain. As they reached the city gate, a procession coming in the other direction met them. It was a funeral procession heading towards the place of burial which by custom was outside the town. The dead person was the only son of his widowed mother.**

**In those days such a woman, without a man in her family, would probably become destitute, unable in that society to earn a living. The shrouded body would have been laid on a stretcher. (St Luke in writing about a “bier” was using a word familiar in Greek culture.) The gospel tells us that Jesus touched the bier, and then addressed the young man. By touching it, Jesus risked ritual defilement.**

**It is no accident that this incident bears similarities with an event described in 1 Kings Chapter 17 verses 8-24. There the prophet Elijah approaching Zarephath meets an impoverished widow at the town gate. She hopes to prepare a basic meal to share with her son; perhaps a last meal since their survival is unlikely. The prophet helps her with the provision of food, and several days later when the son is about to expire, stretches himself over the boy and prays vehemently. The text says: “The Lord heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived.” The prophet “gave him to his mother, and said, ‘Lord, your son is alive!’”**

**St Luke throughout his gospel showed Jesus as the one who fulfilled Elijah’s role. Early in his gospel (4:24f) Jesus compares himself to both Elijah and Elisha, both of whom had a mission which took them beyond the people of Israel to the Gentiles.**

**There are some significant differences as well between the raising of the son of the Zarephath widow, and that at Nain. Elijah needs to pray to God to restore the young man. Jesus raises the young man by the power of his word alone. Thus, Luke makes it plain that the power to raise the dead lies in Jesus’ own person.**

**We need perhaps to remind ourselves that this return to life was resuscitation back into normal human life, not through a resurrection leading into eternal life. To be resurrected in the fullest sense means never again to be encumbered by death as bodily limitations.**

**Some Christians may find it hard to believe the young man at Nain was actually dead. Others may see in this incident, God breaking into the normal chain of cause and effect, suggesting this is not a case of a violation of a law of the universe, but the working of a new factor, revealing fresh and unforeseeable possibilities.**

**Either way St Luke makes it plain that the miracle at Nain is a prefiguration of the resurrection that really matters - that of Jesus the Lord, with the promise of resurrection for his followers.**

**He also shows how the raising of the young man revealed the compassion of Jesus for the bereft widow. "There is sadness enough when children bury parents, but it does not compare to the grief attending nature's reversal, when parents bury children. Jesus' whole attention is on the woman; the storyteller seems unaware of the disciples, the crowd, the bearers, the mourners." (p96, "Luke", Fred B Craddock)**

**The sympathies of Jesus give the lie to any suggestion that grieving for a loved one is an inappropriate activity for a Christian believer. St Paul too knew the appropriateness of grieving, though he wisely wrote to the Thessalonians telling them "not to grieve as those who have no hope."**

**The miracle at Nain is part of the unfolding story of Jesus, the build-up to the greater miracle of his resurrection that was not resuscitation, but rather the movement into a new mode of being, eternal life. St Paul would write: “flesh, blood do not inherit the kingdom of God....but we shall be changed.” The resurrection life will bear a certain continuity with the present one, but equally there will be a radical difference....as a seed turns into a plant; an embryo into a foetus, and then a living infant who passes through the stages of human life to old age. In the Apostles’ Creed we say, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.”**

**While we cannot envisage what precisely that will mean we can with confidence affirm that all that goes to make each one of us a person will in God’s goodness be restored and renewed. There was an early Christian heresy, Gnosticism. Echoes of it can be found in our own day.**

**According to it the true self, the ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ escapes the body. Well, I give it is true that when our bodies get very creaky and perhaps physical pain seems to want to take us over, we might reasonably look forward to being delivered from our bodies.**

**“The resurrection of the body” refers rather to our whole self as persons. Personality is revealed through the body: its appearance, sounds and movement. We recognise each other as particular people through observing each other. Whatever eternal life is, it cannot be less than our present life, and must be richer as we are drawn closer into the orbit of divine mercy, love and light.**

**Buddhism has a vision of Nirvana, which includes a state of deep peace in a realm of nothingness. Christianity affirms human identity beyond death...all made possible by Christ’s death and resurrection.**

**Some other religious traditions speak of reincarnation, of people after death returning to this world as another human being, or perhaps as some other creature. It seems to me that a Westerner adopting this view may well do so through a fear of moving on, a reluctance to trust the God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.**

**When we lose somebody who is very dear to us, or when our own death looms before us, we are fortunate if we have a friend who can grieve with us, and we are richly and immeasurably blessed if we can draw on a faith that transcends death.**

**Thank God that he places such enormous value on each and every human life, bestowing such dignity on it, that any talk of reincarnation is farcical.**