

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 3 At the town's gate

How often are our eyes clouded and, in these present times, how often do we get used to the tears and suffering of those who have lost everything, in order to overcome our pain?

We have to wake up, look: both the Advent and the incoming Jubilee prompt us to take this first step. We have to convert ourselves, not by looking far away. In fact, we have to look for the 'Door of Hope', ie Christ in our midst, in our cities, not in 'utopia'.

Yes, in this encounter of Jesus' He is the Door of Hope. He is at the gate of Nain and He – Life – encounters a procession of Death.

We have already considered how towns and cities are usually the places where encounters take place. In particular, in ancient times the town's gates were meeting places, 'spectators' of important social events, of prophetic words and gestures.

Nain's gates are a passageway both for Jesus – who enters with the crowd following Him – and for the cortege – going out because the dead could not be buried within the city walls. What is the outcome of this encounter? What remains in the town of Jesus' passage? Mercy, acknowledged by the people; praise for the tears being wiped dry; joy spreading around the region, as a renewed hope.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Holy Spirit of God,

*come and open the gates of our spirit and of our heart
to the infinite.*

Open them for good

and do not let us try to close them again.

Open them to the mystery of God

and to the immensity of the universe.

Open our intellects to the wonderful horizons of the Divine Wisdom.

Open our way of thinking

*so that it may be ready to welcome ways of thinking
different from our own.*

Open our minds

to the diversity of temperaments

and of the personalities around us.

Open our affection

*towards all those who are lacking love,
who are lacking comfort and support.*

Open our charity

to the problems of the world,

to all the needs of humanity.

(Jean Galot)

1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

Luke 7:11-17

11 It happened that soon afterwards He went to a town called Nain, accompanied by His disciples and a great number of people. 12 Now when He was near the gate of the town there was a dead man being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a considerable number of the townspeople was with her. 13 When the Lord saw her He felt sorry for her and said to her, 'Don't cry.' 14 Then He went up and touched the bier and the bearers stood still, and He said, 'Young man, I tell you: get up'. 15 And the dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Everyone was filled with awe and glorified God saying, 'A great prophet has risen up among us; God has visited His people.' 17 And this view of Him spread throughout Judaea and all over the countryside.

This is the second narrative part out of the three that can be distinguished in Jesus' Galilean Deeds (Lk 4:14-9:50), where St Luke presents the effects of the power of the Word, working through the ministry of Jesus, in particular towards those who, in the Sermon on the Mount, are defined as the "poor of Yahweh" (6:20-8:3): pagans, widows, lepers, tax collectors, sinners.

It is typical of St Luke to present Jesus' action in history as the place where God appears to man. A typical sentence is indeed "It happened..", which we find in our text. And that occurs also in Lk 1:8, dealing with the inauguration of God's intervention in human history through the advent of His Son made flesh, and starting with the Forerunner's conception.

Thus, "It happened..." is not only a way of saying that the life of Jesus was a historical event, but that what happens thanks to Jesus is relevant for men, healing and redeeming them, not just in a specific time but in a perennial 'today'.

"It happened..." opens Chapters 2, 3, 5 and 6; and it is present also in 4:31, 36 (opening the first narrative part); 8:1, 22, 24b; 13:22 (second narrative part); and 17:11 (third narrative part).

Of course, it opens also our text where the event is an encounter that generates a resurrection, a miracle of consolation for the most disadvantaged category of townspeople, widows.

Let us approach the text.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 11-12 The encounter;
- 13 The protagonist;
- 14-15 Restitution;
- 16-17 Conclusion.

The encounter

11 It happened that soon afterwards He went to a town called Nain, accompanied by His disciples and a great number of people. 12 Now when He was near the gate of the town there was a dead man being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a considerable number of the townspeople was with her.

The incipit of verse 11 in the Greek text is, as we have already seen, "It happened...". Here St Luke is giving us the exact coordinates of the event in order for us to clearly understand that God's action establishes a historical relation with man, exactly as it happened to Our Lady at Nazareth, or to Sts Zechariah and Elisabeth.

Here the place of Jesus' encounter is the town of Nain. It is here that something important happens, with consequences on human life.

Nain, whose name means 'the nice / graceful one' and was located near Nazareth, was a small town. Presumably the gate was only one (or maybe we should regard it as a symbol, given that the archaeological excavations found none).

And the gate of the town (even more so if there was only one) was the place of meeting for the VIP's of the time; the place where the prophets used to proclaim their message (cf 1 K 22:10; Jr 17:19); and in any case, the obligatory passage of those who went in and those who went out. In addition to that, the town's gate was also the place where news spread, where the good or bad deeds of its inhabitants would become known (cf Pr 31:31).

Jesus entered: the verb shows that Jesus is journeying on. This entrance is not something accidental or a digression, but part of His journey to Jerusalem. He is not alone: "They went together..." is the same verb used for Jesus' journey. When it is referred to the disciples it is in imperfect form, and that denotes continuity. It is part of discipleship. There is also a large crowd with them. Here the term used is "multitude", that is, a great number of people.

When Jesus is approaching the town's gate, the encounter takes place. A corpse is being carried away, among a "considerable number of townspeople". It is striking that the term used for this second category of crowds is different from that used for the first: "considerable number" against "multitude". A first difference between the two crowds is their respective numerical size. But there is another and more relevant difference: we see a procession following Jesus, the Living One; and a procession accompanying those who are carrying away a lifeless body out of the walls. The term 'exekomizeto', 'to carry away, out', derives from 'komizo', 'to take care of'. The dead man is a precious person, the only son of a widower mother, that is, the possibility for the mother to survive, someone who would have earned a living for himself and for her too. In consequence of his death, her living is at risk, if she cannot find any help. There is a procession, then, taking care of a dead man. The crowd is with his mother, a widow, with the only act of mercy possible to them.

There are two flows of people, one opposite to the other: the first one, Jesus', seems to be prevailing. It is a foreshadowing of the victory of life over death.

But who is Jesus looking at? Who does He take care of?

The protagonist

13 When the Lord saw her He felt sorry for her and said to her, 'Don't cry.'

"Having seen her..." Jesus sees her, the widow. His gaze does not remain sterile; He does have genuine compassion. His attitude is indeed God's viscerally trembling before the other, His attitude of loving all those who are in a precarious situation, in poverty, with His fatherly love and maternal womb. Then, here Jesus' main encounter is with the widow who attracts His gaze, the gaze of the Lord (a title common in the post-Easter community, and here St Luke uses it for the first time). In an instant His gaze sees her condition of thorough misery. It is the gaze of God who takes care of the orphan and the widow (cf Ps 145:9). It is a gaze that arouses a love so deeply involved in the situation that it can be described as belonging to the viscera / womb. In fact, the womb of the widow which is now empty, deprived of its dearest fruit, becomes God's very womb. There is an exchange of roles.

In the gaze of the Lord, God welcomes and carries within Himself the widow's wound, her misery, her bewilderment. He does not disdain her lament, her tears. Everything is His, in His loving closeness.

Reading between the lines, St Luke is referring to a paschal dimension: even if Jesus had not announced His passion yet, as He was in the early phase of His journey, we can have a deeper look at His mind and see in perspective, far away in the distance, under the Cross, another Mother crying, His own, crying for Him who is the Only-Begotten Son.

In the Lord's gaze we can see once again the gaze of God, moved as a mother's womb, and involved in the sorrow of the Mother and in the death of the Son.

In the Scriptures there is also a strong reference to the Book of the Prophet Zechariah who, when describing the liberation and renewal of Jerusalem relates how, thanks to the Spirit of grace and consolation, "they will mourn as for an only son, they will mourn for him as one mourns for a first-born" (Zc 12:10). This reference

in Zechariah brings a promise of grace to Jerusalem, after the greatest sorrows; if we refer it to our text instead, grace is administered to that cortege and the weeping mother at the gate of the city of Nain.

What is St Luke trying to communicate by this little passage to the post-Easter community? Is that community like a 'widow' who, without her Only-Begotten Son, has no possibility of survival, of subsistence? Perhaps in that community the hope in the Lord's return was losing strength, or even fading, and they were feeling like a widow... and focussing on something else... The community was in tears, feeling lost without Him. And the Lord says, "Do not cry", to the widow, to St Luke's community and to the Church at large.

Restitution

14 Then He went up and touched the bier and the bearers stood still, and He said, 'Young man, I tell you: get up'. 15 And the dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Jesus, the Lord, speaks to the widow, but immediately afterwards He makes a gesture: He touches the coffin. The bearers stand still solemnly, as in a freeze-frame. Then the Lord orders the boy to get up. The verb used is in the passive form: it is not in the power of a dead man to get up, but the power to do so is given to him. "Be resurrected!"

And the dead man, lifeless, sits up, pulls himself up. An active verb indicates his personal response and obedience to the voice capable of resurrecting, capable of giving life again.

This resurrection and, above all, the restitution of the now-living boy to his mother, reminds us of a similar event related in the book of Kings (1 K 17:17): the resurrection and restitution of the widow's son performed by the prophet Elijah to that widow who had given him hospitality in Zarephthah of Sidon.

Our text thus appears to be situated between two relevant events: a prophetic action (Elijah's, "awaited", "he had to prepare a way for the Lord") and its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus' resurrection. In-between, the widow of Nain who had her son given back to her, and who was her one and only hope of survival.

There is an only child in all the cases we have seen: he is the recipient of a gift of life because he is resurrected, but he is also a gift of life himself, the possibility and hope of life for a widow, a gift that becomes a gift, this is the true 'restitution'.

And the Risen Lord wants to give back to the Lucan community, compared to a widow without hope and in tears, her life, His life, always. The Lord is taking care of His Church; He gazes at her with compassion, seeing her crying in her misery and lack of hope. He is the Lord, the Only-Begotten Son who is at the same time the Bridegroom who is late and whom we must wait for, and also the true resurrected Son, the One who from death is given back to us as the ever present Lord and Giver-of-Life. He gives us the Spirit of grace and consolation (Zc 12:10).

Conclusion

16 Everyone was filled with awe and glorified God saying, 'A great prophet has risen up among us; God has visited His people.' 17 And this view of Him spread throughout Judaea and all over the countryside.

Typically in St Luke, after an extraordinary action comes awe as well as the giving glory to God, acknowledging the presence of one of His prophets. The theme of praise, of giving glory to God, is present also in 1:13, 14, 28, 58; 2:10 and above all in the four hymns.

We are symbolically at the gate of the graceful town and right at the gate of the town, the place where the prophets used to prophesy, everyone recognizes that a great prophet has appeared, the prophet who had been promised by Moses (cf Dt 18:15). Do people think that Elijah is back and at the gate of Zarephthah?

In any case, the theme of the prophet is attributed to Jesus Himself in 4:24 and 13:33. The theme of God's visit to His people is also mentioned by St Luke in 1:68 and occurs once again in 19:44, where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, due to the fact that she did not recognize having been visited by the Lord.

The visit of God is an important theme in the Bible, exalting the closeness of God to man as a helper. He takes care of His people and is concerned about them and He intervenes (cf Ex 3:16).

In the 'Benedictus' hymn we bless God who "has visited and redeemed His people". In 1:78 God is assimilated to a sun that will rise to illuminate and direct our steps on the path of peace... that peace brought by the One whom Jerusalem failed to recognize (19:42): Jesus.

Jerusalem and Nain are the cities in the background of this event. Jerusalem is the custodian of a grace that has yet to come, promised and be given after passing through a sorrow "like the crying for a first-born" (Zc 12:10); and the custodian of the future restoration (when St Luke's Gospel was written, Jerusalem had already been destroyed) thanks to that first-born that she did not recognize (Lk 19:44).

Nain, on the contrary, is a town capable of recognizing the grace present in God's visitation, thanks to Jesus who is the Life-Giver at its gate.

2. Meditatio

(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)

- Which of the two cities represents me more? Nain or Jerusalem? Both carry a Hope in the process of being fulfilled. How much does Hope dwell in me?

- But am I also a bearer of Hope, or do I communicate myself to others like a dead person? Which are the gates of the city where I meet those who cry?

Do I bring my own self, or rather am I a city welcoming the Lord, letting Him dwell in me and act through me?

- Am I a widow? Do I lack anything? Am I waiting for my precious Good, the Lord, to be returned to me in the daily encounter of prayer, of the sacraments? How do I nourish my waking for the Encounter?

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

*Lord, we praise and bless You,
merciful Goodness encountering our own misery,
coming to visit us as the sun rising from on high.
You who at Nain turned a mother's tears into joy,
console us in our solitude,
when we lose You, when we do not recognize You.
You have overcome death not only by touching a corpse,
but also by dying Yourself and then rising again,
the first fruits of all of us who will rise again in You.
As You are the Living One,
the voice that calls us to communion with You gives us life.
We are living because we love.
Give us an attentive gaze too, a merciful heart,
to touch and stop what seems hopeless:
and in You, New Hope, every tear will be dried.*

4. Contemplatio

(to contemplate the Word / silence)

Let us be 'infected' by Jesus' gaze, the gaze of the Living One making us alive.
In the depths of prayer let us that gaze resurrect our dying relationships.

5. Collatio **(to share the Word)**

Let us share what the Word makes resound in our selves, as a 'circle' of life and reciprocal consolation.