

Pentecost 2, Year C  
June 6, 2010  
Luke 7:11-17  
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George Bernard Shaw is said to have remarked that the pig's advantage is that it doesn't know it is going to die. We do know of our mortality, and this knowledge is not at all comfortable for the vast majority of us. Indeed, people spend lots of time fantasizing about avoiding death and presenting their fantasies to the public. Think, for example, about television.

Certainly people get killed on TV, but for the most part not the heroes, not the ones we are invited to identify with. In our dramas they are the ones who are ceaselessly coming to the very edge of death and then, at the last second, avoiding it. What we need to notice today is that the predictable formula is not that the good guys overcome death, it is that they avoid it altogether. Keefer Sutherland in the show "24", now mercifully concluded, is the ultimate example of this. As agent Jack Bauer he is constantly faced with the imminent detonation of various weapons of mass destruction – which themselves are certain to slaughter millions - and in defeating these nefarious schemes he must, when he is not torturing someone to procure vital information, face death himself in what amounts to once per hour for an entire "day." Yet, season after season the bombs never go off, and he never actually dies. Death is never overcome on that show; it is always sidestepped, eluded by

the hero. By a contrast that proves the point, the really jarring, even grotesque thing about the BBC show “MI5” is that the good guys do periodically get killed, often by very bad people, though always in the line of duty and in ways that win the day.

Both the sickness we feel when art portrays the death of heroes, and the satisfaction we experience when they avoid it in often dramatic ways, demonstrate that most of us have not yet come to grips with the fact of our mortality, and do not know quite what to do with it, and that is what makes Christianity in general, and our story today from St. Luke’s gospel in particular of continuing relevance. For in our story today Luke has constructed a narrative in which someone has died, and the other characters in this story have begun to feel the full impact of this death. Without a male to care for her the mother, who is a widow, will have to cope with her grief in the context of direst poverty. She may be able to rely for sustenance upon some of the mourners gathered around her, but she is destined to spend the rest of her life as a lonely, bereaved charity case.

But there is a twist in this story that gets to the very heart of the proclamation of the gospel. For unlike “MI5” which admits the reality of death but portrays it as so final that it can only be avenged, and unlike “24” which denies the reality of death for “us” who are good and worthy, our story today embraces the reality of death for everyone, accepts it as part of human

existence, but then goes on to declare that in the presence of what God has done in Christ death is not denied or avoided, but transformed, overcome. Though it feels final, as it did to that widow Luke has sketched out for us, the larger reality is that in and through God new life emerges from death.

Historically when speaking of life overcoming or transforming death the Church has tended to express the hope of life eternal after the grave by speaking of heaven. This is indeed an important aspect of our proclamation that life overcomes death, and Paul said as much when he pointed out that “if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” But as central as this hope is, it is not the point of our story today, nor should we confine our understanding of how life overcomes death to these considerations. To do so would be to suggest that this life we have now is to be no more than tolerated for the sake of gaining something bigger later on, not embraced for the sake of the experience itself.

So far as we can tell that is not what Jesus did. He spoke of the kingdom of God as it impacts this life, as it transforms us here and now, not merely or only there and then. Had he wanted to he could have taught his disciples that this earthly existence has no value in itself, it is merely the necessary time of waiting for what is to come, and by doing so have saved himself a lot of trouble, and very likely spared himself an early death. But the next life is barely mentioned in any of his teachings, and certainly played no

part in why he was arrested and executed. Jesus lived that he might transform this life we lead now, and died that we might understand that this transformation is larger even than death itself.

This is exactly what happens in our story for today. It is to this life that the son is restored, and in this world that he lives once again. Though we tend to misunderstand the metaphor of resuscitation – imagining that it means that life goes on exactly as before – this is not so much a flaw in Luke’s story as it is the expression of our continuing fears about mortality even in the face of the Christian proclamation.

For death does change things, and it changes them forever, but the gospel proclaims that change does not mean the end, and that because of this we all can continue to grow in the spirit provided we embrace life in faith. I know, for example, that the particular kind of life I shared with my dad ended in March of 2007 when he died, and that particular relationship is over. But the central theological issue confronting me over that death is not one of speculating on what happened to him, but rather is one of discerning my own attitude toward that death and the subsequent end of that particular expression of our relationship. If my grief had turned to despair that indeed all was over not just for him, but for me as well, then death wins after all. But I quickly realized that the end of his earthly life was an invitation to move more deeply into the life we had shared, into all the barely-examined corners, the

ambivalence, the joys and hurts, and so to become more and more open to a continual process of being changed by that relationship. I am not here indulging in the sentimental notion that “he lives on in my heart.” I am saying rather that his death created a new kind of life in me, one that has begun to break down some of the barriers that separated us while he lived, and which will, provided I am courageous enough to pursue things to the end, result eventually in complete reconciliation, the sort that happens only when I can truly ask for the forgiveness I need, and extend the forgiveness he needs. That is new life from death; that is the victory of life over death right here and now, not there and then.

This is in essence the story that Luke tells us today. It is not a story about what happens after a person dies. In fact it has nothing to do with that part of the expression of Christian hope. It is rather a statement that in this world, right here and now, in the presence of what God has done in Christ new life is constantly emerging from death, and the only question is whether or not we are open to embracing that new life and living into the possibilities it presents to us. The tendency to want to mine this story for historical content, and consequently to focus on the way in which the miracle is presented often obscures this point, causing many faithful people to imagine either that what happened then does not happen now, or to believe that the only way to

understand life coming out of death is through avoiding death altogether. That is not the point today.

For whether that story preserves any history or not is a question I am perfectly happy to beg since it is not particularly relevant to the meaning conveyed. Dramatically the story is a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus; theologically it is a demonstration of the power of God in Christ to create new life where no one believes such a thing is possible. What we learn today is that such a thing is indeed possible; it happens all the time. The question for us is whether or not we have the eyes to see it, the ears to hear it, the heart to receive it. For we all are constantly in the presence of the looming power of death, and so it is good to know, and better to feel in the deepest core of our being, the ever emerging power of life whose source is God, and whose purpose is redemption.