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Luke 7:11-17

Simone Weil once wrote: ‘Difficult as it is really to listen to someone in affliction, it is just as difficult for him to know that compassion is listening to him.’¹ Compassion, what Schopenhauer called ‘the basis of all morality’,² is the word that comes to mind when I read this passage. Walter Brueggemann notes that ‘compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.’³ He goes on to argue that we should understand Jesus’ compassion not simply as his personal emotional reaction but as public criticism in which he dares to act upon his concern in the face of the numbness of the society he serves. Jesus penetrates that numbness by his compassion. His criticism of injustice and dehumanising ideologies leads him to enter into, and finally embody, the hurt.

Australian poet Les Murray describes such one:

The man we surround, the man no one approaches
simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps
not like a child, not like the wind, like a man
and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even
sob very loudly – yet the dignity of his weeping

holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him
in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,
and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him
stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds
longing for tears as children for a rainbow.⁴

While it is commendably true that the crowd identify in Jesus’ action the action of God’s prophet, there is much more going on in Luke’s passage. Here is the heart of *God*—the ‘God of the poor, friend of the weak’⁵—receiving the gift of weeping from one who had nothing else to give.

Anyone who has ever been involved in the funeral of a young person senses that more than something is amiss. Grandparents and parents grieving while she who should be out playing is laying in a wooden box. Sharon Weber laments:

How can you be gone?
I wasn’t finished with you yet.
Now I have to “finish with you”
without you.⁶

It all feels like the helpless despair reflected in Edvard Munch’s ‘Scream’, or Wilhelm Kotarbinski’s ‘The Grave of a Suicide’. And we intuitively sense that what is going on here is connected to a bigger reality, a wrecked world gravely out of joint, and that, in Peter Forsyth’s words, only ‘something deeper than the wrecked world can mend [it], only a God of love and power infinite’⁷—if such one exists at all.

Luke’s text gives us no clues as to why this son died. Was he ill? Did he commit suicide, overcome with grief at his own father’s death? Was he executed by the state? Was he a soldier, killed in a senseless war? We simply do not know because we are not told—perhaps deliberately so. What we *are* told is that Jesus was there at the time of this widow’s grief, his heart went out to her, he spoke to the dead son, and gave him back to his mother. The disciples and large crowd were filled with awe, praised God and gossiped about what had happened.

During WWII, after a German V-2 rocket attack killed a child in London, Dylan Thomas penned his famous poem, 'Refusal To Mourn The Death, By Fire, Of A Child In London'.⁸ In this poem in which art and death embrace, Thomas deals with the question of whether death is permanent or temporary. If, because of the resurrection, death is temporary, then it is acceptable, Thomas proposes, for us to mourn, for this process of temporary grief is commensurate with the temporary death. But if death is permanent, then, according to Thomas, grief must be repressed by refusing to mourn. The poem's final line reads, 'After the first death, there is no other'. Its meaning is perhaps deliberately ambiguous. Does it point to a second death? Or does it betray a more pessimistic belief about death's permanency? Little wonder that Thomas doesn't know whether to grieve or not. Perhaps the best insight we have of Thomas' own hope is in the first line: 'Never until the mankind making'. Is there a suggestion here that Thomas will mourn, but not yet; that he will mourn when God's word spoken at time's beginning is heard again, 'Let there be light'? Thomas goes on to both affirm and enrich the movement of life and death by sowing his 'salt seed'. He can do this because although he is journeying and mourning through the valley of the shadow of death, he maintains an uncertain hope that the mourning will end. Moreover, Thomas' poem suggests that were it not for the resurrection, 'the stations of the breath', to come, then all humanity has been betrayed. Certainly, Luke's story invites us to recall the resurrection of the Resurrector himself.⁹

Just as clergy in the Middle Ages employed mural painting to cure body and soul, so here does Luke graphically use word painting to point to him who would heal and restore us. Certainly Christ does not heal us as a doctor might—standing over us, diagnosing our sickness, prescribing medicine for us, and then leaving us to heal 'naturally'. Rather, as James Torrance reminds us, Christ becomes the patient, assuming the very humanity which is in need of redemption, and anointed by the Spirit in his life of perfect and vicarious obedience for us, our humanity is healed *in him*.¹⁰ When God became human in Jesus Christ and took his own humanity to the Cross, Jesus brought the presence and reality of God not only into life, but into death. He came to those who were bereft of faith as well as those who professed faith. God came to those who were sick unto death as well as to those who were given strength of health and life. In Jesus Christ, God entered not only into the dying of humanity, but into the grave of humanity. Indeed, God knows more about what it means to die than any of us because the tomb of Jesus became the tomb of God. No one goes to their grave alone. No longer does the grave represent the terror of godlessness, for God had his own grave here on earth.

We cannot read Luke's story without sensing that this is one of those times when we must understand the present in light of the end, present death in the light of the death of death itself. For this One would face not only his own grave but the overcoming of such. Indeed, the overcoming of death in this One Man is the death of death for all.¹¹

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¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1952), 91.

² Cited in Al Condeluci and Condeluci Condeluci, *Beyond Difference* (London: CRC Press, 1996), 165. This comports with a Hasidic saying, 'He who feels no compassion will become insane.' Cited in Jean Ovide Bourdeau, *Genocidal Legacy: On the Doctrine of Self-Righteousness* (Victoria: Trafford, 2005), 107.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 85.

⁴ Les A. Murray, 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow', n.p. [cited 19 August 2006]. Online: http://www.lesmurray.org/pm_aor.htm

⁵ See Graham Kendrick's hymn 'Beauty for Brokenness, Hope for Despair', 1993, Make Way Music.

⁶ Sharon Weber, 'A Recovering Widow's Poems', n.p. [cited 19 August 2006]. Online: <http://www.webhealing.com/hon/sharweb.html>. See also Barbara J. Morejohn, 'Sudden Widow', n.p. [cited 19 August 2006]. Online: <http://www.americamagazine.org/poem.cfm?articleTypeID=25&textID=2589&issueID=410>; William C. Williams, 'The Widow's Lament in Springtime', in *Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume 1* (ed. A. W. Litz and C. MacGowan; Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), 171. Two recent autobiographical books superbly, and very differently, reflect on the loss of a son. I think of Bryce Courtenay's novel *April Fool's Day: A Modern Love Story*, in which he recounts his son's battle with AIDS. Also, Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son*, written after his 25-year-old son died in a mountain

climbing accident. In this book of prayerful pangs, Wolterstorff, refusing to turn from the 'demonic awfulness' of death, rediscovers the God for whom death and suffering are no strangers.

⁷ Peter T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for Wartime on a Christian Theodicy* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1916), 202.

⁸ Cited in Barbara N. Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 147-8.

⁹ Unsurprisingly, the resurrection motif, whether as concrete or metaphor, is prolific in the visual arts. Treatments of Elisha raising a widow's son, Jesus raising Lazarus or Jairus' daughter, and, of course, Jesus' own resurrection, are common. For visual examples of our Lukan text see the 19th Century painting 'Widow' by English artist Ford Madox Brown, or Wilson Ong's 'Raising the Daughter of Jairus', or Tom Scott's 'Widow's Lament' or William Hole's 'The Widow's Son at Nain Rising to Life'.

¹⁰ James B. Torrance, 'The Vicarious Humanity of Christ', in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed AD 381* (ed. T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1981), 141.

¹¹ See John Donne, 'Death be not Proud', in *Seventeenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (ed. R. Cummings; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 55-6.