

## Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2019

I am, probably like you, quite familiar with the story of the raising of the widow of Nain's son, and yet when I read it recently there was something within it which altered my complete perception of it. As we have just heard in the Gospel: "And when he came nigh to the gate of the city [the city of Nain], behold a dead man was carried out, the only son of his mother" (Lk 7:12) – "the only son (*filius unicus*)" – an impression which was reinforced by the Greek "μόνογενής (only-begotten)", and so it should really be "*filius unigenitus*": Does that now ring any bells, any big bells (it certainly did for me)? We will, of course, be shortly singing in the Creed: "*Filium Dei unigenitum* (the only-begotten Son of God)".

The appearance of the "son" in the story made me associate him with "the only-begotten Son of God", although the Son of God himself was also very much present. And yet the "son" of the story was not so much the "son" of his father as of his mother: "the only son of his mother". But, all the same, Christ was indeed "the only son of his mother": Our Lady did not have any other children apart from him. She had remained a virgin after the Virgin Birth of Christ; and so she is "ever-Virgin (*semper Virgo*)", as we are frequently reminded of during the course of the Mass: at the *Confiteor*, the *Suscipe, sancta Trinitas*, the Canon itself, and then the *Libera nos*, the prayer immediately following the Our Father.

The "son", to get back to the city of Nain (or "Naim", as it is in the Latin), was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow" (Lk 7:12). We are certainly used to thinking of Our Blessed Lady as a mother and a virgin, the "ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of [...] God" (*Canon of the Mass*), but probably hardly ever as a "widow", and yet she was, as the result of the death of St Joseph (there is, by the way, a beautiful depiction of this scene on the front of St Joseph's altar at Belmont, where the Wednesday Latin Mass is celebrated). Her being a widow, as well as a virgin, is confirmed by the fact that Our Lord, on the Cross, entrusted her to the care of St John, thus demonstrating that she was both without a husband and without any other children.

I suppose that we do not tend to think of Our Lady as a widow for a number of reasons: for a start, she possesses other far more significant titles, a couple of which have already been mentioned; and then there is perhaps

the notion that, because she was so spiritual, so “full of grace” (Lk 1:28), the loss of St Joseph would not have affected her too much. But we forget that she was truly human and felt sorrow like anyone else. Indeed, she would feel an acute sorrow at the foot of the Cross. Although the death of St Joseph is not among the Seven Sorrows, which we remember especially in this month of September, we nevertheless recognise the sorrow inherent in her widowhood. We have therefore now established the “man” and “his mother” – “behold a dead man was carried out, the only son of his mother and she was a widow” (Lk 7:12) – as being figures, images (if you like), of Our Lord himself and his Mother.



The “dead man” is “carried out”, quite obviously, for burial. The story, therefore, prefigures Christ’s own burial in the Sepulchre, after his death on the Cross, his body also being accompanied by a widowed mother. The burial of Christ is, as such, the last of the Seven Sorrows of Our Lady. There is a mosaic in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem which shows her, as the custom was, walking in front of the bier; walking in front of the body of her dead Son and its bearers. That is why the Lord, at Nain, talks first to the widow, since she is the one leading the procession: “Weep not (*Noli flere*)” (Lk 7:13). This is not some glib remark, however, in the face of profound grief, but rather a sympathetic comment motivated by compassion: “when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her” (Lk 7:13).

Anyone would also have had a similar reaction at seeing Christ's own sorrowful Mother: "*Quis est homo qui non fletet, matrem Christi si vidéret in tanto supplicio?* (Is there one who would not weep, whelmed in miseries so deep, Christ's dear Mother to behold?) *Quis non posset contristári Christi Matrem contemplári doléntem cum Fílio?* (Can the human heart refrain from partaking in her pain, in that Mother's pain untold?)" – When I hear the words of the *Stabat Mater*, they are (in my head that is) more often than not accompanied by the sublime music of Pergolesi. Nevertheless, just as the *Stabat Mater* will end with "*paradisi gloria* (the glory of paradise)", so the grief of the widow of Nain will have a happy, if not quite so glorious, ending.

The Lord then directly addresses the widow of Nain's son, her dead son of course: "Young man (*Adolescens*) [...]" (Lk 7:14) – the Latin, "*Adolescens*", makes one think immediately of 'adolescent': the "Young man" must indeed be an adolescent. Yet we really need to go beyond the Latin to the Greek, to get a more accurate definition and closer identification of the "man" with Our Lord. The Greek νεανίσκος actually means any man under forty; any man in his prime of life, so to speak. So that certainly includes Our Lord, who died at the still relatively young age of thirty three. "Young man, I say to thee, Arise" (Lk 7:14) – but the clincher is found in that command: "Arise (*surge*)" – the "young man" rises, albeit by resuscitation, from the dead; just as the one who bids him will do so later on, also bringing immense joy to his once sorrowing Mother.

A possible connection between the story of the raising of the widow of Nain's son and that of the resurrection of Christ, the Virgin's Son, is perhaps further accentuated by the concluding comment of the crowds: "A great prophet is risen up (*surrexit*) amongst us" (Lk 7:16). It is not so much the "young man", therefore, who rises but rather the one who raised him: the true Risen One, the Risen Lord himself, that "great prophet" – "*surrexit* (risen up)" formed, as it is, from the same verb as "*surge* (Arise)" (Lk 7:14) – namely, *surgere*. Everything that Christ did and said in his ministry was, as such, leading to his future death and resurrection, and indeed pointed towards it. Yes, he raised the daughter of Jairus and the brother of Martha and Mary, but there was perhaps nothing quite as explicit as his raising of the son of a widowed mother.