

## SHARED PAIN

God shares our pain. In Luke, Jesus summons life back to the dead son of the woman from Nain. In 1 Kings, Elijah breathes life back into the dead son of the widow of Zarapheth. In both stories, the prophets give the newly alive boys back to their mothers. God interacts with the world's pain.

Elijah came out of the rural backwoods of Gilead to pray for rain. His ears are constantly tuned in to God and he stays at a brook called Cherith where God has organized for ravens to feed the prophet. Come on, pull the other leg! We'll continue: the ravens brought him bread for the morning meal and meat for the evening. They were obviously bower birds who pinched from others. Reminds me of a line I once heard, 'Many people want the food that faith brings, but they don't like the bird that brings it!' Sorry if that's the case with me but there isn't a lot of choice.

When the water in the stream dried up God told Elijah to go to Zarapheth which was a town on the Mediterranean coast near Sidon. Why? because God said that one of his servants would provide him with food. He goes – but what a reception. He meets her outside the city gate where she is gathering sticks for a fire. He, like the Messiah, centuries later, asks her for a drink of water and a bit of bread. Her response is heart breaking. She has nothing for her and her son but a bit of grain and a tiny bit of oil. After the two eat this they will lay down and die. (In case this seems a little remote, let's us think of the millions in our world today who are in similar or even worse circumstances.)

Elijah knows from previous experience that God has something 'up his sleeve' for them. He asks the woman to prepare something for him from the grain and oil first; then to use what's left, for them. He also revealed that these two simple elements would not run out until the rain came. Wonderful woman, she carried out the prophet's requests and they ate together for days. You would have thought that this was the end of the story. No way – worse was to come. The little fella became very ill and died. Naturally she calls out to Elijah. 'What's this all about? You come here uninvited and now my darling boy is dead!'

Elijah came and picked up the lad and carried him to his own bed then prayed with all his might. He lay on the child in an effort to warm him up and gave him artificial respiration as he kept pleading with God. Later the boy breathed and Elijah handed him back to his mother. She said, 'I know now that you are a man of god and what you say is gospel truth.'

Jesus is drawn to the 'down and out' of society – then and now. Nain is in lower Galilee and today is an Arabic town about 14 kms south of Nazareth. Jesus sees a funeral procession and, most importantly, the bereaved mother a widow. Funerals were led by female mourners and even the poorest had to pay for pipers to play. The mother is torn with grief and Jesus shares the passion of her sorrow and is compelled to help. He says with tender voice, 'Don't cry, my dear lady.' Then he moved towards the body and says, 'Young

man you can get up now.’ He did and spoke. They all realized that they were in the place of holy mystery, that God was at work among them. They were quietly worshipful then noisily grateful, calling out among themselves, ‘God is back, looking to the needs of his people.’ News of Jesus spread throughout the whole country.

The word compassion could really be translated ‘guts’. It means the inward parts, bowels, liver, heart and lungs. It is used for strong compassion and for depth of God’s mercies. To the people of the NT era the bowels were the seat of emotion – we say heart today. In the story of the father who had compassion for his wayward son, the same word is used; similarly in the story of the Good Samaritan. Compassion always results in action. Implicit in this Biblical word is the deliberate extension of ourselves to others. Seeing those in need and ‘opening our guts’ or feeling very deeply for them means that we are compelled to look beyond the immediate which we see on TV every night. John later writes to his friends, ‘Let us put our love, not into talk but into deeds.’ The saying still rings true, ‘Actions speak louder than words.’

In today’s Psalm 146 we read, ‘God executes justice for the oppressed; God gives food to the hungry; God upholds the orphan and the widow.’ Widows were regarded in Judaism as a socially deprived class who merited special support and consideration. Way back in Exodus Jews were told, ‘You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan.’ Jesus cared for the women who had no husband and the early church was noted for its practical deeds for these widows and their children.

God shares our pain. Whether it be those things that affect our children – often the very hardest thing to accept, ‘Touch me but don’t lay a finger on my kids.’ – or whether it is our own hurt and suffering. God gives us the grace and strength to bear the pain. Jesus knew deep pain as he saw it in the lives of his own people and later as he knew the depth of an evil-doer’s death. The Holy Spirit not only helps us in our need but talks to God on our behalf and groans with the intensity of it. No matter what is before us, God will share completely in it while waiting for us to cry out for help. May we, like the widows in our Gospel, cry out and experience miracles of love and grace. AMEN

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