

Andrew Miller revisits
a biblical resurrection



Engraving by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794 - 1872)

A CURIOUS CURE?

... Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out – the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. (Luke 7:11-17)

The Galilean village of Nain is nine miles south of Nazareth and is still occupied today. It is aptly named (*Hebrew*: pleasant) because it is half way up a hill with a spectacular view over the Jezreel valley below to snow-capped mountains beyond. The nearby hills are studded with caves.

As Jesus walked down to the entrance to the village, he saw and heard a funeral procession. A body was being carried by four men on an open coffin, as still happens in parts of the Middle East today. He learnt this was a young man, the only son of his widowed mother. But what prompted Jesus to do what he did? After all, he would have been familiar with death and must have attended several funerals of relatives and local people.

There are only two other occasions when he intervened in this way. In one this was only necessary because the patient died while Jesus was side-tracked by another case,¹ and the other was deliberate because, for special reasons, he waited until the sick person had died before taking any action.² So why this time? Why risk the inevitable publicity which he otherwise strongly discouraged?

His heart went out

The clue to this is in the word translated here as ‘his heart went out’ to her (elsewhere ‘he had compassion’). The Greek root is the word for intestines (as in *splanchnic*), and here Luke is saying that this scene caused Jesus’ ‘guts to be churned up’. Indeed, this word is used almost exclusively of Jesus and by him. It is a deep emotional response, and so it differs from the equally important and uniquely Christian concept known as *agape* love (which is fundamentally a decision of our will).

It was Jesus’ compassion for the crowds that made him yearn for their spiritual needs, heal their sick, and feed their hungry.³ It was his compassion that led him to heal the blind, those with leprosy and those affected by demons.⁴ It was his compassion that is the foundation of his two most sublime parables, known as the Good Samaritan⁵ and the Prodigal Son.⁶ In both these stories this gut-wrenching was at complete odds with the attitudes of everyone else.

Churned up inside?

So what prompted this deep gut reaction in Jesus? Was it his discovery that the widow was now truly alone, defenceless, and without any support other than charity? Or could it be that it brought back painful memories of another widow? – his own mother grieving the loss of her husband Joseph? At that time, Jesus would have been right in the middle of the home where Mary experienced her own devastation, and he would have been deeply involved in her pain as she gradually rebuilt her shattered life.

are we still encountering some cases that deeply churn us up inside?

Perhaps, when he saw this widow at Nain, he relived his own feelings when he knew that Joseph would never come back. And perhaps too on that day at Nain, he was reminded that the day would come when the widow Mary would have to bury her Son.

From time to time we need to recognise that, with the relentless pressure of demanding patients, we may be continuing to offer good competent medicine but somehow drifting away from this depth of compassion. Or, instead, are we still encountering some cases that deeply churn us up inside?

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references

1. Mark 5:22-34
2. John 11:1-15
3. Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32
4. Matthew 20:34; Mark 1:41, 9:22
5. Luke 10:33
6. Luke 15:20