

Luke 7.11-17

They are there every year, though these days they are rather diminished in number. In many ways the National Pilgrimage to Walsingham wouldn't be the same without them – that little group of protestors at the Pump in the Common Place, to shout at the procession as it goes by, and, each year, the police have the job of making sure they don't break the law and try to keep them apart from everyone else.

It's a familiar pattern of maintaining law and order. It's what happens when there's a public demonstration or march by two opposing groups –the kind of thing that happens here in London or other capital cities all the time –there's strict control so that the two processions don't meet and clash.

Hold that image in your mind as you think about that gospel passage we've just heard. What Luke gives us is a picture of two processions: The first is *going into* Nain, a pretty out-of-the-way village in the Jezreel valley, not that far from Nazareth. It's a fairly large procession. At its centre is Jesus and his disciples, but there's a large crowd too –curious to see something, to discover what Jesus is about, perhaps to hear some teaching of his. Whatever their motives it seems that Jesus has gathered a large group with him, and they are on the move.

The second procession is *coming out* of Nain. It's a funeral procession, and at its centre is a widow on the way to bury her only son. She knows the future for her is bleak. At the death of her son she loses not only companionship and the love of her child, she also loses the security of her future. Her property will now belong to her late husband's next male relative, his brother most likely, and so her future will be dictated by the way he sees fit. The crowd wail and weep –some because they are hired mourners, others because they are sharing her pain at a future which is, to say the least bleak.

Two processions: One is headed up by Jesus, *the Lord of life*. The other is headed up by *death*. And it seems to me that those two processions might stand for something that is going on in our culture, and what it is that we are about tonight.

That first procession is marked by a fear over the future, a sense of hopelessness and anxiety over the spectre of death. And it's interesting, isn't it, that so much of our culture is remarkably confused about how to respond to death. On the one hand we're told 'death is nothing at all', funeral liturgies have any sense of grief suppressed from them in the misguided notion that they can only be 'celebrations' – that is of course if a funeral is held at all, with so many now opting for the 'direct cremation' with no service of any kind, secular or religious. So often people don't know how to mourn, and so occasions like the death of Her Late Majesty the Queen become like the release of a national pressure valve where emotions that have been hidden can find expression – because I suspect woven into the extraordinary scenes of grief for her were memories of countless personal losses and bereavements that were hidden beneath the surface. There's a procession of death that marches through our culture, and it's anxious, confused, hopeless.

And so that second procession? This is the witness of people of faith; this is our witness tonight in this Requiem Mass and in the steady, consistent witness of the Guild of All Souls through the decades. It's realistic about death and the hurt and pain that it brings into our lives. Death is not a 'nothing at all', and one of the things that we'll want to do in this liturgy tonight is to acknowledge the grief we still feel over those we love but see in this life no more. The liturgy of the Requiem is right to balance the darkness of loss with the spirit of thanksgiving for the good deeds of the departed.

But as this procession makes its way through the world it is marked by hope and life. As we return to the Gospel passage before us tonight we might ask ourselves why Jesus restores this man to life? Why the widow is given back a son when all other widows from that time to this aren't? As these two processions collide there is resurrection, because death cannot hold sway in the presence of Christ. Death cannot reign when Jesus is around –it is powerless, and has to give sway to him.

Jesus lifts the widow's son to a new physical life that will end, one day, with the grave again. But it is the *sign* that he will lift us all to a new and eternal life with him in glory. Death does not have the last word in him, and it will not have the last word in us either –Jesus will. Like many of us here I suspect, my Christian imagination was developed as a child through the Narnia stories of C S Lewis. Perhaps you remember the final dreamlike chapter of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* – we travel with Caspian and the children to the edge of the world, “and when the third day dawned... they saw a wonder ahead. It was as if a wall stood between them and the sky, a greenish-grey, shimmering, trembling wall...” This wave, with the bright sun shining behind it and the landscape just visible beyond represents the ‘veil’ between the earth and what the books call ‘Aslan’s country’. It serves as an image of death as the gateway to something more vivid, more intense than all the good gifts we have experienced here. Lewis helps us picture life beyond death as an endlessly unfolding story. Death puts an end to endings and opens up growth without a final horizon.

And so the invitation to be a part of that procession of life –to be those who, with Jesus, in our baptisms have passed from death to life and so are signs of resurrection to a world that so often seems to be in thrall to death’s domain. The invitation to walk from the doors of this church after Mass as life bearers –carrying hope, joy, peace into your relationships, into your homes, into your communities; to challenge all that deals death, for Jesus has conquered death so that we may be sharers of his new life which will last eternally.

So in hope let us step out into our world with a new vision of how to live and how to die: in Christ God’s irrepressible new life is ours, and the future is glory.