

The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche
Galatians 1:11-24
Luke 7:11-17
6/10/2007

If you took English in college or even saw the movie *Four Weddings and Funeral*, perhaps you know the poem I am about to read. It was composed by W.H. Auden after the loss of his companion. I have to confess that I hesitate to read it in a sermon (let alone at the joy of a Baptism). It does reveal a raw and unmasked view of grief that seems contrary to the Good News of the Jesus. But such grief is a glimpse that we need today. It is not that we need sadness. It is, instead, that to understand the meaning of our readings and the Good News of God, we need to sojourn into what death often means for humans and how God meets us in that place with peace. The poem begins:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He is Dead.
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the woods;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

The poem might have been written by Auden, but it conveys what the widow in the Gospel reading from Luke today must have felt. This widow, by definition, had already lost her husband, her companion and financial protection. Luckily, she still had a son. A Son, for a widow in that time, would have been social security, medicare, pension, and insurance. But, then, even her son is gone. Not only must this woman deal with the unfair grief of losing a child. She must now contemplate that her world is being dismantled piece by piece. The widow, like Auden, must have cried out, "Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun."

The son is carried in procession through the city gates of Nain. People congregate so that there is a crowd. The public in that time would have joined in the procession but not joined in helping her to survive. The unreliable group proceeds through the city gates. Inside had been protection

and life. Now, there is degradation and shame. But there, in that place of grief, shame, pain and loneliness, Jesus meets the funeral procession. He does always meet us in the darkest of hours. And Jesus has compassion for the woman, desires to help her. Jesus says, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" [and] The dead man sat up and began to speak". Who was dead is suddenly alive again. Jesus gives the son back to his Mother. She is also restored. It is a moment of resurrection and ultimate joy. Surely, this biblical scene is the moment that inspired Monty Python's most oft quoted words, "But I'm not dead yet." Indeed, the man gets off the stretcher. Put back the moon. Put back the stars. Put back the SON. It is hard to even imagine what joy that widow must have felt at this second chance, this move toward hope and new life.

People in our post-modern time are often quick to dismiss the miraculous. Such acts are, after all, biologically impossible if not improbable. But even if you do not want to accept that this man suddenly physically woke up from death and that this is THE reality of what happened, I hope that you will accept that this Biblical account does contain A reality. It is the reality of who Jesus is and, it is a reality that works in tandem with that Auden poem. Jesus here is meeting a woman in that place where nothing can come of any good. And he takes the poverty, oppression, and the degradation of this widow woman and molds them into a new life, a new life in which even the least of the people are connected and cared for. In a sense, this story is denigrated to be understood only as a scientific abnormality. After all the son did eventually die again. The miracle was not to escape biological death. What is amazing here is the spiritual and societal resurrection of the woman. Jesus, through compassion, took a woman from worst place in life shame, shined her up, embraced her, and gave her a new life. And in doing so, he is showing us that the kingdom of God is nothing other than God and us caring for the most helpless and defenseless.

Paul was in a similarly death-ful position, though he ended up being more like the townspeople than the widow herself. Paul was convinced that he should base his life on righteousness, a noble goal. But soon that righteousness became self-righteousness. It consumed him. He based his faith on convicting others, on ostracizing them, on demanding that they be taken outside of the city walls. He somehow became deadened from the loving, living God. And yet, through revelation and the grace of God he is transformed. And suddenly the hopeless death of persecuting others is transformed into a spirit of love and grace. God meets death and gives new life.

These two accounts are nothing less than the eternal struggle between Satan and God. Satan, yes, Satan.... I am preaching about Satan in an Episcopal Church. But by "Satan", I probably mean something different than what you think I mean. Satan, I want to claim, is oft misunderstood. Satan is not a person or an entity like the devil. Satan is just a word, a word that means, "The accuser." When we and our communities are infected by Satan, we are moved to persecute others, accuse them, call them out. And this "accuser" works inside us and in our communities. It is contagious. And when we are held by it, we move to a place of self-righteousness, like Paul did, and we accuse others of being fallen without examining our own selves. The community of the widow also had Satan at its very core. They would not have cared for the woman's needs.

On the other hand, the word in Greek for the Holy Spirit, for the third aspect of God, simply means the Defender. The Defender, the Holy Spirit, God moves to defend and promote protection of all people, even the least of us. When we care for the widows and orphans, the homeless and the bereaved, we are being inspired by and working with the Holy Spirit, the defender. Basically, it seems the same story as *Spiderman*, *Star Wars*, or any summer blockbuster with good versus evil as its theme, *SANS* one major element. In our story, in the Gospel of Jesus, the good never depends on accusing, violence, retribution, retaliation, or vengeance to overcome evil. In our story, we simply have the grace that Paul experiences and the compassion that Jesus yields undoing the work of the accuser.

In Baptism, when we worship God as Christians here, when we hold out our hands to receive the love of God in Communion, we are promising that we will with each breath and action in our lives, attempt to do the work of the Holy Spirit, that we will seek and serve all people, that we will respect the dignity of every human being. In a sense, we are making promises to meet the problems of the world, as Jesus met that widow, with the love of God. Much of the world lives in Auden's last line, where nothing now will come to any good. But if we meet the widows, the persecuting Paul's, and even our own selves, as Jesus met the widow. If we have compassion, then there can be good, and the world can be put back into place. Put back the moon. Put back the stars. Put back the Son.