

My Brothers and Sisters,

The parallels between today's reading from I Kings and today's Gospel are obvious. In each, a widow's only son is restored to life and returned to his mother. In both stories, the miracle gives rise to faith. The widow of Zarephath says to Elijah, "*Now indeed I know that you are a man of God.*" The mourners in Nain exclaim, "*A great prophet has arisen in our midst, and God has visited his people.*" The key difference is that Elijah asks God to restore the widow of Zarephath's son to life while Jesus himself calls the widow of Nain's son back to life.

The story of widow of Nain is unique in the Gospels. Unlike almost all the other miracles in the Gospels, no one asked Jesus to intervene. He intervened completely on his own initiative. Also, in most of the other miracles, not only does someone ask Jesus to perform the miracle, but also the person asking makes a profession of faith in Jesus as part of the ask. Since no one asked Jesus to intervene at Nain, no one professed faith in him prior to the miracle.

The obvious question is why did Jesus choose to intervene. The Gospel tells us that Jesus "*was moved with pity*" for the widowed mother. In other words, Jesus was moved with compassion for the woman. St. Luke's Gospel is sometimes called the Gospel of Compassion. On a purely human level, Jesus' compassion makes perfect sense. Jesus himself was the only son of a widowed mother. At his crucifixion, Jesus demonstrated the same kind of compassion for his own mother when he entrusted her to his beloved disciple.

It seems to me that compassion has two components. Compassion is, first, sensitivity to the real needs of others, both those that are expressed and those that remain unexpressed, and, second, responsiveness to those needs. Jesus himself is the Compassion of God. On a very human level, Jesus felt with and for the widow who had lost her son. He understood her grief and perhaps her dependence on her son. He responded appropriately for him. As the Son of God made human, he had the unique power to raise her son back to life, and he did so.

In the sixth chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus said, "*Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate*" [6:36; British JB, 1966]. Therefore, like Jesus, we are called to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of others. However, Luke's Gospel also contains the parable of the rich man who dined sumptuously each day while Lazarus, a poor man covered with sores, lay at his door and would gladly have eaten the scraps from the rich man's table. Lazarus, of course, ended up in heaven while the rich man burned in hell. The sin of the rich man was his lack of compassion. Not only did he not give Lazarus anything to eat, but he probably did not even notice him. Most of us can see the needs of people who are very much like us. However, many of us have a much harder time either seeing or caring about the needs of those who are very different from us.

My brothers and sisters, our challenge is to be sensitive, caring, and responsive not just to the needs of family and friends and people like us but also to the needs of people who are very different from us here in our own country and throughout the world. We need to be sensitive, caring, and responsive to suffering people throughout the world, whether from poverty, hunger, thirst, war, injustice, or disease.