



## 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Sr. Nuala Cotter

mercredi 1er juin 2016

My grandfather, a native of Knocknagoshel, Co. Kerry, Ireland, immigrated to the United States in 1900. He never lost his very thick Kerry brogue or his memories of life in a small Irish village at the end of the nineteenth century. One of his stories concerned a wake that he attended as a boy. The dead man was laid out in his own house, and all the neighbors came to wake him. There might have been some praying, but there was also a lot of storytelling and singing, eating and drinking. At this wake, however, there was also something else : the *keeners*. These professional women mourners would lament and wail over the dead person for hours on end ; it was a custom that reached back into a very old Celtic world. At this particular wake, my grandfather said, he went outside and found them having a drink and a smoke. After a while, one of the women said to the others, "All right, girls, 'tis time to go in and have another cry." At that, they all threw their shawls over their heads, gathered up their skirts and went back into action. And that's how it was done. It was the usual way, the norm.

I doubt that it was much different in the time of Jesus. The Widow of Nain would have had to rely on friends and professionals to help her make the right sounds of mourning over her dead son, since she had neither husband nor children left. The "large crowd" of which the gospel speaks would have accompanied her to the gravesite to make sure that the young man was decently buried. Maybe afterward they'd stop back at her house for the obligatory meal, which she would have had to provide out of her slight means. And then, out the door they'd go, and she would have been alone, with nobody to care for her survival. It was sad, but it was normal.

It seems, however, that Luke wants to show that Jesus isn't bound by norms. A day or two before, for instance, despite its not being normal for Roman and Jew to engage each other, Jesus had healed the servant of a Roman officer.

This centurion had sent an advance party of well-wishers to speak for him. In the context of the Roman custom of client-patron relationships, this seems fairly normal, a kind of local variation on the theme. Since he'd done them a huge favor (building their synagogue), the Jews think it's only right for Jesus to do a favor for this man in return. A *quid pro quo*, so to speak. (Why Jesus is the one who has to repay the centurion is less clear to our contemporary sensibilities, but it seems that it's connected with the centurion's love of "our nation.")

A bit later, the centurion sends another group who relay his thoughts about the structure of command, where he compares Jesus' power to that of a Roman army officer - unusual, to say the least. In fact, that break from the normal by the Roman impresses Jesus so much that he says to the crowd : "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Luke 7 : 9). It's probably safe to say that praise of the faith of a member of the enemy occupier was surely outside the norm. So, in this story, norms and breaking of norms seem to be in a kind of dialogue with each other.

Now, at the gate of the little town of Nain, Jesus is faced with a new set of norms, this time all stemming from within his own culture. So, for example, as she follows the coffin, the mother never says a word to Jesus. Neither do the keeners or any of the others of the “large crowd” who make up the funeral procession. This was normal – women did not speak to strange men. But Jesus hears her weeping and, as Luke says, he was “filled with pity for her.” This feeling leads him, as it often does, to go beyond what is expected or even acceptable. Speaking to women, touching the dead : neither action follows the norm and the latter also has ritual consequences. Still, he says to her, “Do not weep.” And then he touches the coffin, making himself ritually impure in the process, while he speaks a word of life to the dead man, who sits up and begins to speak.

The witnesses recognize that Jesus is in the line of Elijah, a great prophet. They exclaim that “God has visited his people,” and spread the news about this deed of power “throughout the whole of Judea and the surrounding region.” In a sense, they see the prophetic norm being fulfilled : prophets raise the dead and do strange and wonderful things.

The account tells us nothing more, however, about the widow whose plight moved Jesus to this deed. What did she understand from it all ? Perhaps nothing more than that with her son back, her life had been restored to “normal.” But of course, it could never really be the same after that shatteringly wonderful experience.

How about us ? What can we understand from it all ? Perhaps something about Jesus, something about his ability to hear and his capacity to feel what others are feeling, his decision to pay attention to what truly matters rather simply to stop at the externals – those “norms” mentioned earlier. He sets us an example, I think, and a big challenge. Can we go beyond the norms that govern our communities, societies, and cultures to discover what really matters ?

In addition to what could be a stern challenge, however, I think we can see that Jesus also invites us most gently to turn to him with all our own needs, our awkward relationships, our crushing burdens, our hopeless situations. Sometimes, we can be like the centurion, able to express ourselves, supported by great faith, surrounded by people who really want to help us. All of that is grace – wonderful to experience, especially in the midst of difficulty. At other times, however, we can be more like the Widow of Nain, voiceless amid the professional mourners, believing that the source of our life is well and truly gone forever. Like her, we can weep and we can mourn, but like her, too, we can raise our eyes to see Jesus, the true source of our life, looking at us with deep compassion and a love that has already stretched out its arms on a cross so that we may have life, and have it to the full.

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1 Kings 17 : 17-24 ; Psalm 30 : 2, 4, 5-6, 11, 12, 13 ; Galatians 1 : 11-19 ; Luke 7 : 11-17

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