

From the Gospel according to St. John:

*Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.*

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It has been called ‘the question that never goes away’.<sup>1</sup> It’s the question that, at one time or another, arises in virtually every heart; even in the hearts of those who have long ago chosen not to believe. It’s the question that arises in every situation whenever we encounter sorrow and tragedy and pain; and especially the sorrow and tragedy and pain experienced by the young and the elderly and the vulnerable; and by those whom we love. It’s the question which is raised a million times every day; maybe more recently because of the damage caused by Fiona or by Ian; but those are only the most recent examples. It’s the question raised by those facing unwanted news in hospital emergency rooms and by those standing beside freshly dug graves.

The possibilities are endless; you’ve all faced them at one time or another; there are, in fact, too many to count. And, sadly, it’s the question that defies our easy answers; our perhaps well-intentioned but all too simplistic responses in the face of human anguish and suffering and sorrow; our one-size-fits-all answers that almost always miss the mark. Why would God allow this to happen? Why would a loving God allow someone to suffer so much in such a way?

That’s the question that must have come to the minds of the people of Nain that we hear about in this week’s Gospel: a question that must have arisen in the minds the people of that small town; in a cultural and theological context that assumed that all suffering was some form of punishment for sin. Why? Why would God allow this to happen? Why would a loving God allow someone to suffer so much in such a way. What could she have done wrong to deserve such a fate?

And perhaps we can also imagine the fear and desperation that she faces. Perhaps we know something of the emotional loss of a child that she must bear, as deeply painful, as heartbreaking, as that always is. Maybe you know something like that all too well. And perhaps we also know something of the economic and social uncertainty that she faces; the uncertainty of a widow who has no other son;<sup>2</sup> no male to lean on in a world where financial and social place were determined almost exclusively by men. What would happen to her? How would she put food on the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.philipyanney.com/archives/3889>:

After traveling to Newtown, Connecticut, last December, I put aside other writing projects to write a short book called *The Question That Never Goes Away*. Even as I was writing it, more tragedies occurred: the Boston Marathon bombings, a fertilizer plant explosion, an earthquake in China, tornadoes in Oklahoma, wildfires in Colorado and Arizona. Meanwhile, nearly every day I get a Caring Bridge update on several friends who are undergoing treatment for cancer. Whether in large-scale tragedies or more intimate crises of hurt and loss, we all ask the question “*Why* would God allow this to happen?” Indeed it is the question that never goes away.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 7:12:

ὡς δὲ ἤγγισε τῇ πύλῃ τῆς πόλεως, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐξεκομίζετο τεθνηκῶς υἱὸς **μονογενῆς** τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ, καὶ αὐτὴ ἦν χήρα, καὶ ὄχλος τῆς πόλεως ἱκανὸς ἦν σὺν αὐτῇ;

**μονογενῆς**; from **μόνος** and **γίνομαι**; *only born*, that is, *sole*: - only (begotten, child).

table? And what arrangements might she be forced to accept in order to survive?

The risk that she faces is beyond words. Even now, two thousand years later, we can understand a little of her desperation and fear; because in so many ways her realities are the realities faced by so many in our own time. Life is all too uncertain. Everything can be going along just fine; and then, in the blink of an eye, it can all fall apart. And whenever that happens, when everything seems to be crumbling around us and within us, the very same question jumps to our lips. Why? Why would God allow this to happen? Why would a loving God allow someone to suffer so much in such a way? It is, in truth, the question that never goes away.

And simple answers aren't enough, as tempting as they will be. Because life is far more complex than simple answers allow. For all the many different things that we hold in common, we are a thousand different situations playing out on ten thousand stages; and the whys that we look for in our moments of tragedy and loss are as many and as varied as each circumstance requires.

But this much I do know; and this much I hold on to no matter how strong the winds blow around us: that the God who chose not to just sit back casually and watch our sorrow and our sadness and our brokenness and our pain but freely chose to enter into it, to ensure it, himself; who in his son chose to share our flesh and blood; to share our sorrows and our fears, and, ultimately, to lift those sorrows and fears from us, is the God to whom I can always turn; the God whom I can always trust in my struggles and in my fears.

That's why what Jesus does for this widow is so tremendously powerful.

*Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.*

He who from the Cross will give the care of his own grieving widowed mother into the hands of a new son, into the hands of the disciples John, in this week's Gospel gives the care of this poor grieving widow into the hands of her newly risen son. And the only-begotten Son of God who gives life to the only-begotten son of a poor widow in this week's Gospel is the Son of God whose own Resurrection gives new life to all of God's daughters and sons; to all of us, each of us dearly-beloved; each of us deeply loved. He is the Christ whose compassion reaches out to us this day and every day just as surely as it reached out to that poor widow that day. And he is the Christ who stands beside us even when our fears and our tears blind us and make it impossible to see clearly.

*"To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge..."*

That's how St. Paul puts it in this week's Epistle.

*... that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,*

*may be able to comprehend with all saints*

*what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;*

*and to know the love of Christ,*

*which surpasses knowledge,*

*that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.<sup>3</sup>*

Knowing that he faced every sorrow that we face for us. That we might know his love at all times. That we might trust his love, even when it's hard to see.

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 3:17-19