

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 6 JUNE 2010

Rev. Jacob de Ridder

1 Kings 17: 8 - 24; Luke 7: 11 - 17

"Alive! Alive, O"

On a bitterly cold winter's day some years ago, five-year-old Jimmy chased a sled onto the glazed ice of Lake Michigan. In the blink of an eye he disappeared beneath the ice. The last words his dad heard were: "Save me, Dad!" Jimmy's panic-stricken father plunged into the freezing water, but extreme cold quickly rendered him helpless, and he left the scene in an ambulance.

For over twenty minutes Jimmy remained submerged beneath the icy waters. When his limp, lifeless body was pulled from the lake by divers, he had no pulse. But he had something going for him – strangely, mainly the sub-zero water! Scientists call what happened the "Mammalian Diving Reflex." The shock of the cold water allowed Jimmy to live without breathing for an abnormally long time. Slowly he came around, having sustained no permanent damage – and today, Jimmy is living a normal life. He has been written up as a modern-day medical marvel.

Who – or what – can raise a dead person to life? Discounting rare, astounding true stories like Jimmy's, and marvellous modern medical miracles of resuscitation and restoration, which sometimes seem highly improbable, there are not too many recorded instances, and very few where the claim is believable or can be authenticated.

However, if you do an internet search for modern-day resurrections, you will find lots of claims and stories – but then, not everything you find on the internet is the total truth.

Turning to the Bible for answers, as well we might, we discover that, apart from the resurrection of Jesus, scripture has seven – and only seven – recorded instances of a dead person raised to life.

And then, of course, there is Jesus himself, whose resurrection is recorded in all four gospels, and referred to in many other New Testament writings. His is the supreme pioneer – a true case of resurrection, as opposed to a temporary restoration of life!

Of the seven other Biblical episodes of raising a dead person, three are at the hands of Jesus – the raising of Jairus' daughter, the raising of Lazarus, and the raising of the widow's son from Nain. This last one forms today's lectionary gospel reading.

Of the other four, two are in the Hebrew Scriptures, and two in the New Testament. In our first reading today from 1 Kings chapter 17, the prophet Elijah raised a dead boy to life, Some years later, his successor Elisha performed a similar feat. That is found in 2 Kings 4.

It is recorded that two apostles of the infant church, Peter and Paul, also raised one dead person each – Peter raised Tabitha, as you can read in Acts 9, and Paul raised a young man named Eutychus, see Acts 20.

The prophet Elijah faced difficulties – he was in danger of death from starvation. Not that he was exactly the only one. Times were bad, and many were in similar desperate straits.

There was a widow who had a young son, and Elijah was moved to ask her for some food and drink. While not refusing this request, she told of her sad plight: after the loaf she was about to bake, she had nothing more. She and her young son would then doubtless die.

The prophet, speaking the word of God, reassured her, saying her flour and oil would not run out until there was new rain on the land. The prophet stayed with the widow and her son for some time, and they were saved from starvation by the miraculous replenishing of the widow's modest flour and oil.

But tragedy struck: the young son suddenly died. The widow's reaction was understandable – anger, despair, blaming the prophet and his God. And how did the prophet respond? He prayed, pointing out to God the injustice of this death. Then, he restored the boy to life. More correctly, of course, God restored the boy to life, through the prophet.

Sometimes death occurs naturally, and there is sudden, tragic, violent, and preventable death. It is, or seems to be, an inescapable reality in this world. With modern warfare, violence and terrorism, we humans are experts at doling out death – wholesale! Abuses of, and indifference to the vulnerable also result in deaths in bulk! Bob Dylan wrote: *How many deaths will it take 'til (we) know, that too many people have died?*

In today's Gospel, we heard the story of the body of a young man, also the only son of a widow, being carried off for burial. The profoundly compassionate Jesus was moved. He told the widow to weep no more. Then he stepped up to the bier, touched it and said: "Young man, I say to you, rise up." And he sat up, and began to speak. And Jesus "Gave him back to his mother."

Luke wanted us to see Jesus literally raising a man who was physically dead. At the word of Jesus, the dead would live again. Jesus is the Word that even raises the dead!

But here we should also pay attention to a deeper Biblical teaching. As is the case today, death was widely considered the final, ultimate enemy of all who live, universally to be dreaded. But Jesus, and the New Testament, changed this outlook profoundly. The kind of death *really* to be feared, Jesus shows, is not that of the body, but that of the spirit. The Gospel of John especially dwells on this theme.

Though I am not morbid or pessimistic, I can kind of understand those who say that we are, all of us, on the road to the cemetery, and the grave that awaits us there, as surely as that young man from Nain was. For some people, death is the final end of the human story, the end of the road, the end of existence. Oblivion into eternity. The Dead End! The Final Curtain.

But wait – there **is** more! Jesus meets us on our way to the cemetery, has pity on us and says: "Young man/old man, young woman/old woman, little child, I say to you: Rise up!" Though we will surely die, to believe in Jesus is already to pass from death to eternal life.

Ancient Greek historian and biographer Plutarch described an interesting encounter. Alexander the Great, seeing Diogenes looking attentively at a bundle of human bones, asked the philosopher what he was looking for. Diogenes' reply: "That which I cannot find – the difference between your father's bones and those of his slaves."

In this world, so it goes, only taxes and death are inevitable. I will refrain from comment on the first, as I am not qualified to – but truly, death is universal. The believer and non-believer equally die. But for us believers, to die is to fall (spiritually) into the hands of God, where we will be safe.

Choosing to fall – or to jump – out of the hands of God is, essentially, choosing separation – and that is to choose spiritual decay and death.

Jesus Christ, God's living, life-giving Word, still comes to us where we are, touches the bier on which we find ourselves being carried along by our culture and speaks directly to us: "Woman, man, I say to you rise up and LIVE!"

Thanks be to God! Amen