

The raising of the widow's son at Nain reminds me of that scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in which the actor Eric Idle plays a dead collector in a village infested by the plague. His cry 'bring out your dead!', 'bring out your dead!' brings a man played by John Cleese to his cart, with an elderly relative strung over his back who objects 'I'm not dead!'. Yet, as the man insists, 'he will be soon, he's very ill... [he'll] be stone dead in...just a minute'. The dead collector hits the elderly relative who is promptly deposited upon the cart to speed up the transaction in compliance with the law.

This scene brings a humorous touch to the horror of the plague in the fourteenth century that turned people against one another. The writer Giovanni Boccaccio wrote, 'It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbours and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands [too]'.¹

The allure of the invitation to 'bring out your dead!' in this scenario serves as reminder that in times of stress and strain, we are more susceptible to sin. Father Finnemore reminded us at High Mass on Sunday that where Christ is lacking, we are dead. At times of crisis, the temptation to 'bring out our dead' is such that even where life obviously may abound, we silence it and offer instead to one another things which are dead: grievances and complaints because we are hurt. We wear our hearts upon our sleeves, even and especially if Christ does not dwell in our hearts by faith.

During our own pandemic, our communities have been severely tested. In our own community, we are of course pained to have to distance congregants one from another and to encourage everyone to leave promptly after Mass in compliance with the law. We should note, by contrast, the way in which as Jesus came into a city called Nain, 'much people of the city' were with the widow in her distress. As the dead man was carried out upon his bier, people gathered in a mighty throng to watch a procession headed by a band of mourners with flutes and cymbals, crying out in grief.

Luke's Gospel often comes across as an extended exercise in crowd control. Consider the journey we have made with Jesus up to our Gospel passage. Even before his baptism, crowds flocked to John the Baptist. Jesus left the crowds to enter the wilderness. The crowd rejected Jesus at Nazareth. Gradually, all come to him to be healed; crowds seek him out. Yet crowds and physical togetherness are no guarantee of safety. The widow at Nain knows so much, but I think in our present circumstances we are wont to forget it. Being crowded together, we can even be driven further apart.

Significantly, at Nain Jesus comes across a crowd of people who have not gathered around him, and they are in distress. The image of Christ being mobbed by swooning fans as he tries to conduct his work, and to retreat to solitude to be with His Father, therefore, does not do justice to this event. We might consider that the crowd at Nain, which Jesus pities, is what we would be like without our Lord and Saviour: a congregation led by a band of mourners, crying out in grief. Whether we are alone or in a crowd, it makes no difference if we have no access to our Father who is in Heaven.

It does not have to be this way. In the episode at Nain, we see Jesus' capacity to quickly discern within a crowd where it is that He is needed. He seeks out the widow. He had compassion on her in her plight. 'And he came and touched the bier; and they that bare him stood still'. Where death is present, we can be silenced and, miraculously, given newness of life. Therefore, we pray that the Lord's 'continual pity' would 'cleanse and defend [His] Church', now more than ever; that we would be filled anew with 'the fulness of God'; that we too would bring life, whether distanced or in a crowd.

We are stressed and strained. In the 1300s, there was 'a great terror in the hearts of men'. At Nain, 'there came a fear on all', but 'all glorified God' and began to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of God. These are two very different kinds of terror. I know which I choose.

¹ *The Decameron*, cit. at [www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/bring-out-your-dead-monty-python-and-holy-grail-1975], accessed 28 Sept.