

Elijah raises the Widow's Son to New Life in Christ

*A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament,
Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass with Baptism of Elias
Emmanuel Kahler, on Sunday, 23 July 2023 (The Seventh
Sunday after Trinity), by The Reverend Dr George Westhaver,
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**And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into
him again, and he revived. 1 KINGS 17.22**

THIS verse comes from the account which follows on immediately from the first miracle of Elijah in the Old Testament lesson. By the word of Elijah and the work of God, woman and son are sustained by miraculous provision of meal, of flour and of oil. But this is just the beginning. This gift seems to turn to a kind of curse when the young boy dies soon after. We then hear how the boy is raised from the dead. And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived.

This is the first time in the Bible that a person is brought back to life from death. The early commentators on the Bible interpret the miracles of Elijah as revealing and proclaiming what God does in Christ.

Considering this double miracle can help us to appreciate the gift of new life which will be granted to little Elias in his baptism. *For the wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our*

Lord. This is the gift of baptism, the gift of life which conquers death. The miracles of Elijah also help us to see something important but often hidden about our lives in Christ.

If you visit the great French Gothic cathedrals and spend some time looking at the thirteenth-century stained glass, you will see that the story of the widow of Zaraphath often appears alongside the crucifixion and resurrection of Our Lord. In the window at Chartres Cathedral, the stained glass image displays this by having her hold the two sticks which she is carrying when Elijah meets her in the form of a cross. Elijah reveals the work of Christ, but the widow also pictures how the Church has the form of a cross. In being willing to give her last meal to the prophet, she is willing to lay down her life for another. Her love has the form of the cross made from two sticks.

In the window at Chartres Cathedral, the two sticks display the cross which our Lord carries in the next image. (Isaac is also there in another window, carrying wood that has the form of a cross). But in the window of the widow and her son, there is something strange about the boy—it is as if we look at him through a strange pair of glasses, so that he looks like he is coming apart into two boys, one on top of the other. It is as if by squinting, we can bring them back together.

This is a picture of the two lives which the boy has and which each of us have. He is born of his mother and father, and he is born again in Christ. The one who works in Elijah to raise the boy to new life is the same one who raises Elias to new life in the font today.

On the one hand, the life of the Christian looks a lot like the life of everyone else—we have similar struggles, we try to make sense of the problem we face each day, and of the way in which big-picture issues affect us or demand some response from us. But we are not just natural people. We have been born again in Christ, we have a new life, a new life which overlaps with this natural life, but which is different.

Sometimes, these two ways of life seem in conflict; St Paul describes this as follows:

or as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness, and to iniquity, unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness, unto holiness.

I know there are occasions when I am invited to forgive, but it seems impossible, like a kind of death. St Paul invites us to choose the goodness which has been poured into us.

In the miracle, Elijah stretches himself out on top of the boy, putting his limbs next to the boy's limbs. This image conveys something of the intimacy by which Christ comes to us; not only our limbs are touched with His limbs, stretched on the cross, our sides made available to be touched, but they are also touched more inwardly. If we think of this nearness, it gives a greater power to St Paul's words that we give our members, our limbs, every bit of ourselves to Christ.

The goal of the Christian life is that the two boys in the window at Chartres are brought into focus. It is not that the natural and the new life in Christ are blending, but that our natural lives are completed and perfected, that the image of God becomes also likeness with God.

One more thing to note which is a great encouragement: we often meet God precisely at those places of great need. The widow meets Elijah when it looks like her life is coming to an end. It's not an easy meeting. He has all the food she can want, but she also passes from death to life.

We can expect to encounter the Lord and His prophets at those times of great need. He does not abandon us in the wilderness. Every time we come to the Holy Communion, we come to Christ who is present to feed us in the wilderness.

When we search the scriptures, the bread of Christ is given to us:

‘Augustine: 1. When we explain the Holy Scriptures, to you, we are, as it were, breaking bread for you. Let you who are hungry receive it and show forth from your heart the fulness of praise, and you who are rich with spiritual food, let you not be poor in virtue’¹

This wilderness is not just out there, it is inside of us – Christ does not just stretch out His arms to embrace us, He descends to the depths of our souls.

He seeks to unite the different principles of life in us, to raise us up in Him into a new person. He has given this new life to us; let us choose it by His grace in us.

But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹ Toal, Sunday Sermons vol 3, p 285

The gift has been given to us this morning. In His Holy Word, in the baptism of Elias and in the Sacrament of the Altar, we are invited to receive again the gift of eternal life.