

## Homily for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

*A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection,  
Pusey House Oxford, at the High Mass on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup>  
September 2023 (The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity) by  
The Reverend Nigel Palmer, Assistant Curate, St Michael  
& All Angels with St James, Croydon*

I KINGS 17.17-24; EPHESIANS 3.13-21; LUKE 7.11-17

FIRST, I should thank Fr George, Fr Mark and all of you here for the opportunity to preach before you this morning. I first came across Pusey House when I was at school up the Woodstock Road. The school was then relentlessly Anglican, with chapel services aplenty on Sundays and most other days in the Tractarian educational tradition. But for boys (only boys in those days) in their A-Level year, the school showed great imagination and liberality by allowing them to go into Oxford on Sunday mornings to any place of worship that took their fancy. Thus it was that I became acquainted with the Roman Catholics at St Aloysius (now the Oxford Oratory) the Quakers at the Society of Friends, Christ Church Cathedral, and the Russian Orthodox at St Nicholas the Wonderworker. And last, but by no means least, this very chapel, still recognisable, as it is still, as the place that had brought to faith, as it still brings to faith, so many famous Oxford characters. They included, but before my time, John Betjeman, the late Poet Laureate, who hymned Pusey House in verse:

*“To worship at High Mass in Pusey House.  
Those were the days when that divine baroque  
Transformed our English altars and our ways.”<sup>1</sup>*

and Tom Driberg, the man whom Edith Sitwell in her day proclaimed “*the hope of English poetry*”, but who later pursued lesser, perhaps more reprehensible, ways, including a career as a Labour Member of Parliament. It is a great privilege and honour to preach here.

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<sup>1</sup> Betjeman, Sir John, “Summoned By Bells”

It is especially relevant to preach here today in this, the Chapel of the Resurrection, on a Sunday, the day we commemorate the Lord's rising from the dead, when two out of our three readings this morning concern resurrection. *"..And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves And I shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord."*<sup>2</sup> It is hard to think that Our Lord did not know this passage from the prophet Ezekiel, and that the three resurrection miracles recounted in the Gospels were not an integral part of the education of His followers to answer correctly that question which plagued them throughout His earthly ministry *"Who do men say that I am ?"*<sup>3</sup> *"I, The Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord."*<sup>4</sup> Those three resurrection miracles may at first seem rather different, one raising from death a little girl on the edge of adolescence, the daughter of a great notable, one, perhaps the most dramatic of the three, involving his friend Lazarus, in whose house he had stayed, and the last, the one we have heard this morning, the raising from the dead of the only son and support of the widow of Nain, which parallels Elijah's raising of the widow's son in the First Book of Kings, which we have also heard this morning.

But the three resurrection miracles in the Gospel do have greater resonances with each other than one might imagine and they are united by components which summoned from Jesus one of his most wonderful qualities, a quality which still shines out at us from the Gospel texts. All three involve the death of someone before their due time. All three are close relatives of those who keenly mourn their loss. Martha and Mary and their brother seem to live together for mutual support, the widow of Nain has lost her only source of strength and comfort- as had Elijah's widow. And Jairus is so desperate at the prospect of his daughter's death that he grabs at any passing straw that might cure her of her fatal illness- his rank, and his wealth mean nothing. At first Jesus's response to their grief seems curiously muted- he does not join in the universal and extravagant wailing by the bedside of the daughter of Jairus, or Lazarus's tomb- he merely silently weeps at His friend's death- and he just wordlessly touches the bier of the widow's son.

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<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 37: 13-14

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:27

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 37: 14

But Jesus's further responses tell us perhaps more about the essence of his real character and therefore of the real essence of God, more than almost anything in the Gospels. Our Protestant heritage too often makes us think of Jesus, as often his followers did, as an austere and magisterial figure, either coming in judgement on the Last Day, or flailing the Pharisees or the foolish virgins for their short-sighted failings, and the consignment of his enemies, those vipers and serpents, to weeping and gnashing of teeth. But the Jesus of the resurrection miracles is perhaps distinguished by one characteristic, which was not much thought of in His day, nor indeed in our own prevailing culture of individualism, as a compelling virtue. That shining virtue is that of compassion. He may have wished to emphasise to His followers His triumphant succession to the great line of Israel's prophets in His miracles, but it is compassion that moves him to restore the only son of the widow of Nain to life, compassion for the desperation of the ruler Jairus, and compassion for the grief of Martha and Mary, this despite Martha's reproach at His late arrival in Bethany and compassion for the state of the "little girl" of Jairus that commands she be given something to eat, when He calls her back from the dusty land of the dead to life.

Now genuine compassion is not a quality which informs much of our public discourse; in common parlance it tends to be thought of perhaps as a rather soft centred virtue, vitiated by sentimentality on the one hand, and unthinking pity on the other, usually placated or satisfied by a donation of some kind. It certainly was not a sentiment which the Romans thought about very much, or if they did, they probably applied it more to themselves than anyone else and certainly not their neighbours: "*Oh what an artist dies in me!*", we are told, were the words uttered by the Emperor Nero, as he fell on his sword. But real compassion, that never suffers what we call rather arrogantly call "compassion fatigue", is a much steelier quality, one which looks at a situation or people with clear headed honesty and evaluates without sentiment. Above all, it seeks, not to indulge itself for its own sake, and the warm feelings of self-satisfaction which may arise from it, but to empathise with its object. We say we are moved by compassion, and yes, we are moved by true compassion from one state to another, where we actively and selflessly move to **do** something for our neighbours because of it, as anyone who has seen film footage of Mother Teresa feeding a dying man will know. And

the divine chain of compassion between God, Man and our neighbour is well summed up by St Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

*“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort: Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them, which are in any kind of trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.”*<sup>5</sup>

Christ’s resurrection miracles are many things: they of course demonstrate the power and authority of the God Man, and His divine power over both Life and Death. But one of them is to demonstrate that God is ever merciful, ever ready to hear our prayers, because He is involved personally with each one of us. Despite our sins, He is ready to listen to us, because of His compassion- what St Paul calls “comfort” for us, as Jesus was prepared to listen to and act upon the pleas of Jairus’s daughter and Martha and Mary, and as he responded to the sorrow in the eyes of the widow of Nain at the death of her son. There’s a medieval miracle play, the Chester Miracle play, I believe, that highlights this in an imaginary passage, not based on any of the Gospels, between Pilate and Christ at His trial. “*Wheretofore didst Thou come into this world?*” asks Pilate of the accused. “*Why, I was brought hither to bring kindness into this world*” replies Christ. So He posits the heart of the Christian message and the whole nature of Godhead in one word against the hard nosed flintiness of the world of power and authority that Pilate represents. Compassion both bestows mercy, and asks for it. Compassion lies in the heart of Jesus crucified. Let us always seek it, and give it, so that following Him, despite our sins, we may rise with Christ in His resurrection to everlasting life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians: 1 3-5