

A Hermeneutical Study of the Compassion of Jesus (Luke 7:11-17) in a Nigerian Society Plagued by Corona Virus

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Abstract

The divine image, which every human being bears as a result of God's benevolence at creation attracts us to the Divine. Human beings are religious by nature and in order to fully realise themselves as humans, they have to be and live out the divine qualities instilled in each of them by the Creator. The opposite is often the case when human actions are critically evaluated. One of the divine qualities, which we ought to acquire and practice in order to enhance good human relationship, is compassion. This singular divine feature characterised Jesus' earthly ministry in words and deeds. In this paper, the writer focuses on an episode in the life of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospel according to Luke 7: 11-17. Jesus had compassion on the widow who lost her only son; he consoled her and restored her son back to life. In following Jesus' footsteps, we can make our world better and be able to bear and live with others.

Keywords: *Compassion, Gospel According to Luke, Women, Widow, Nain*

Introduction

The merciful and compassionate character of God must not remain on the dry and dusty pages of a textbook. The significance of God's concern for the poor is expressed in many of Israel's covenantal laws. When giving loans, the poor may not be charged interest (Exod. 22:25). When rendering judgement, no distinction is to be made between the rich and the poor (Exod 23:3; Lev. 19:5). When it comes to making a sacrifice, the poor can offer in proportion to their means (Lev. 14:21). In addition to God's general concern for the poor, specific attention is given to widows. Of course, the widow is a woman who has lost a husband to death and has not remarried. Widows were frequently poor and commonly oppressed, abused or disadvantaged and because of this, God advocated for their care when other people or systems of social protection failed.

In a world where violence has become a manifestation of supremacy and the oppressed languish in silence, Jesus' compassion towards a helpless widow, who has lost her only source of identity and security poses a challenge

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to our society. The story of how Jesus raised the widow's son at the gate of Nain is from Luke's special source for it is found only in this Gospel (Luke 7: 11-17). In the entire Bible, the name Nain occurs only in this narrative. Luke has given to this miracle a historical-salvation meaning by mentioning the compassion of Jesus (Luke 7:13) and by reporting at the end the acclamation of the people, "A great prophet has arisen among us"! And "God has visited his people"! (Luke 7:16; (Obiorah 201- 2015). This miracle manifests the coming of God among us; his merciful love becomes visible in the compassion of Jesus, which makes him to help especially the weaker and more needy section of the society (Schrumann 398). This work focuses on the story which embodies a character of Jesus that is very dear to the author of the third Gospel; compassion. As Christians, we ought to acquire and practise compassion in order to enhance good human relationship at this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Text of Luke 7: 11-17

11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" And "God has looked favorably on his people!" 17 This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Luke 7:11-17 As a Distinct Pericope

There are indications in the text that Luke 7:11-17 has an internal logic. In the preceding story (vv. 1-10), Jesus was at Capernaum, which is about twenty-five miles north-east of Nain. The characters in verses 1-10 comprise a centurion and his servant, the Jewish elders and of course, Jesus and His disciples. In verses 11-17, two groups of persons going on opposite directions, encounter each other at the gate of Nain. Each of these two distinct crowds has a central figure: for those entering the city, Jesus is the important character and for those exiting, the widow occupies a central position. The event narrated by Luke in 7: 11-17 is actually an encounter between these two protagonists: Jesus and the widow. Verses 18-35 have another subject matter different from the one that immediately precedes it. It is about Jesus' encounter with John's messengers.

Luke 7:11-17 is a complete story in itself while it has some links with the two pericopae that flank it. When compared with the healing of a

centurion's servant, the raising of an only child of a widowed mother accentuates the power of Jesus over death. Disease and death are subject to Jesus' power. Once again, verses 11-17 relate to verses 18-35 particularly in the phrase "and the dead are raised" in verse 22. The acclamation of the crowd, "God has looked favourably on his people" (v. 16), re-echoes the content of verse 22. This can be compared with Luke 1: 68 which states: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has looked favourably on His people and redeemed them". A similar text in the Old Testament is Psalm 111: 9: "He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name." A closer look at Luke 7: 11-17 shows that the narrator intends to portray Jesus as a compassionate miracle worker who was moved by the desperate condition of one of the less privileged of his contemporary society; a widow. It is also a lesson for all of us who today read this episode.

Old Testament Background of Luke 7:11-17

The Old Testament background for the story of Jesus raising the widow's son is miracles wrought by Elijah (1 Kings 17:10-24) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:18-37). Most Jews (and possibly Gentile Christians) of Jesus' day would know the stories of Elijah and Elisha in detail and would quickly understand how they relate to the story of Jesus raising the widow's son.

- Elijah invoked God's help to restore life to the dead son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:10-24). The parallels between this story and the story of Jesus and the widow of Nain are striking. Both Elijah and Jesus come to a gate (1 Kings 17:10, 17; Luke 7:12). Both involve a widow whose only son had died (1 Kings 17:17-18; Luke 7:12). Elijah cries out to the Lord and Jesus had compassion (1 Kings 17:20-21; Luke 7:13). Elijah stretches himself upon the child and Jesus touches the bier (1 Kings 17:21; Luke 7:14). "The soul of the child came into him again" and "He who was dead sat up, and began to speak" (1 Kings 17:22; Luke 7:15). Both Elijah and Jesus "gave them to their mothers"—the wording in the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament is exactly the same (1 King 17:23; Luke 7:15). The mother said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of Yahweh in your mouth is truth," and the crowd said of Jesus, "A great prophet has arisen among us" (1 Kings 17:24 and Luke 7:16) (Culpepper 57).

A major difference between the two stories has to do with the comparative ease with which Jesus raises the man from the dead; while Elijah stretched himself out over the boy three times and prayed to God for the boy's life (1 Kings 17:20-22), Jesus simply touches the bier and commands the young man to rise (Luke 7:14).

- Elisha raised the only son of a Shunammite woman from the dead (2 Kings 4:18-37). Shunem was located 7 miles (11 km) south of Nazaret and Nain was located 5.5 miles (9 km) south-east of Nazareth—so the place where Jesus raises the widow's son is geographically quite near the place where Elisha

raised the Shunammite woman's son (Myers⁷⁴⁷, 946). There are few other parallels, however, between the Elisha story and the Jesus story.

Another difference between the Elijah-Elisha stories and the Jesus story is that both Elijah and Elisha had benefited from the hospitality of the respective mothers and were, in a sense, indebted—but there is no indication that Jesus ever saw the widow of Nain prior to this occasion where he raises her son from the dead. These parallels between the Old Testament prophets and Jesus help the people to understand that Jesus is a prophet (v. 16).

Literary Context of Luke 7:11-17

The text of Luke 7:11-17 manifests that the widowed mother is at the centre of the narrative. It is a meeting between the two important persons of the two groups of people in the pericope; it is an encounter between Jesus and the widow. This story is told from the widow's point of view and the miracle is realized because of her. Other persons in her group are mentioned in relation to her. The dead man was her only son (*monogenēs*) and with her was a large crowd from the town. The term *monogenēs*; "only son" occurs three times in the Synoptic Gospels and only in Luke and besides Luke 7: 12, the other occurrences are also in similar miracle stories (Luke 8: 42; 9: 38).

According to the narrator, Jesus seems not to take notice of the crowd for His gaze was directed only to this poor woman and his first words at the sight of this crowd were addressed to her (v. 13); He had compassion for her. In addition, when the dead young man was raised, Jesus gave him back to the mother (v. 15). In fact, the widow occupies a central role in the text. "She represents another example of a group of those in need; widows who are among the most oppressed or neglected of society" (Kopas 195).

A Hermeneutical Reading of Luke 7:11-17

Only Luke tells the story of the widow of Nain, whose son Jesus revived even as his body was being taken to its burial (Luke 7:11–17).

Verses 11-12

Kai egeneto...eporeuthē—"And it came to pass . . . (that) he journeyed." This construction provides an OT "feel" to the pericope, as it mimics Hebrew and especially LXX verbiage. Note that later in this verse the syntax is V-S (verb-subject) not S-V, which is also a Semitic linguistic characteristic (7; 12, 15, 16, 17) (Voeltz).

According to the Lucan account, Jesus approached the city of Nain in Galilee, accompanied by a large following of disciples and others. The site of ancient Nain, is now occupied by the Arab village of Na`in some four miles south-east of Nazareth. Jesus may have gone directly from Capernaum (7:1-11) to Nain ("the pleasant"). Nain was only about 20 miles south-west of that

town. It lay on the northern slope of the Hill of Moreh, that stood at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley. It was six miles south and a little east of Nazareth and was easily visible across the valley from Nazareth. The Hill of Moreh was a significant site because on its south side stood Shunem, where Elisha raised the son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:18-37). The town has a beautiful view of the Jezreel valley, which might have given it its name, meaning “lovely” or “charming.” At the gate of this town, Jesus met the funeral procession of the young man described as “the only son (*monogenēs huios*) of his mother, and she was a widow.”

Idou—The use of this interjection, especially in the narrative itself, is also a Semitism. *Exekomizeto*—Note the imperfect indicative passive: “was being carried out.” *Tethnēkōs*—a masculine, singular, nominative, perfect active participle, describing the state of the young man, that is, “dead.” *Monogenēs*—This word, also used in John 1:18 amid great controversy, clearly means “only” here, not “only begotten.” *Autē*—This form could be a feminine singular nominative *personal* pronoun, or, a feminine singular nominative demonstrative pronoun, that is, *autē*=this woman. The majuscule manuscripts have no accents or breathing marks, so it is impossible to distinguish the two forms with any certainty. Luke often uses the nominative of the personal pronoun in this slightly ungrammatical way, to mean “he, she, it,” though it is then emphatic (e.g., 1:17; 8:54). If so, this should be rendered, “And she was a widow” (Voeltz).

Following this, the focus of attention is on her: she was a widow, the crowd was with her; Jesus saw her, had compassion on her, spoke to her and, finally, gave the dead man brought back to life to her. She, who is husbandless and sonless and in mourning; she, who epitomizes the “poor” to whom Jesus has come to bring good news, is the real recipient of Jesus’ compassionate ministry. The emphasis on the widowhood of the woman at Nain, however, underscores her desperate plight: not only had she now lost her son, but had earlier lost a husband. The term used for the young man when Jesus calls upon him to arise is *neaniske*. Despite the fact that this means “youth,” it can refer to any man until about the age of forty (Dabelstein 2,459). Making it possible that he had been a young adult and his widowed mother’s only source of support. His death was thus not only a devastating personal loss for her, it may also have represented an economic catastrophe.

Friends were carrying the corpse out through the city “gate” to bury it outside the town, as was customary. “As the funeral procession passed, everyone was expected, if possible, to join the convoy” (Edersheim 168). Cremation was denounced as a purely heathen practice, contrary to the whole spirit of Old Testament teaching” (Edersheim 169). The fact that the “widow” now had no surviving husband or son meant that she was in desperate circumstances, economically as well as emotionally (1 Kgs 17:10). She would probably become destitute without someone to provide for her needs. The

large retinue of mourners was common, though it suggests that she had friends (Josephus).

Verses 13-15

The description of the fate of the widow of Nain in Luke 7: 12 prepares for her encounter with Jesus as narrated in verse 13; He was moved to compassion. Unlike in the preceding pericope, the spontaneity of Jesus' compassion for the widow requires no expression of faith from her or from the sympathizers. In Luke 7: 1-10, the episode before the raising of the widow's son, Jesus praised the faith of the Centurion in these words: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (v. 9). The raising of the widow's son is unconditional. It was his action that elicits faith in the form of divine praise, which the witnesses proclaimed (Rodell 235). In this way, he is like Yahweh in the Old Testament who is unconditionally compassionate. Jesus pitied her for what she was and not for what she could do. Her faith was not a prerequisite for the divine action. She as a person was at the centre of the narrative. It is impressive to note the frequency of her personal pronoun, *autē* in verses 12-13; these verses describe her meeting with Jesus (Roth 172). The deep sorrow of a mother moves Jesus and causes him to perform the miracle of resurrection.

At the gate the two groups brush by each other; each going its own way but it is then that St Luke notes Jesus' feelings: "when the Lord saw her (the woman), he had compassion on her and said to her: 'Do not weep'. The Greek word, *splanchnizomai* literally means, "moved to the bowels". It stands for a deep feeling of compassion and tender love such as that of a mother for her child who is suffering. Luke's use of present imperative *me klaie* presupposes that the woman was pouring her heart in tears. He was actually telling her to stop crying. She must have heard similar consolatory words from those who commiserated with her but "only Jesus could say 'do not weep' and at the same time remove the cause of the tears" (Liefeld 105). In Luke 8: 52, in a similar resuscitation story (Luke 8: 40-42, 49-56), Jesus prepares His miracle by pronouncing the same words addressed to a group of mourners.

Jesus, the compassionate benefactor of widows in the New Covenant, is called "the Lord" *ho Kurios* (v. 13). This is the first time the author of the third Gospel recognizes Him as the Lord and it is not without some significance in the present episode. Prior to the story in Luke 7: 11-17, Jesus has been addressed as *ho Kurios* but only as a respectful title (Luke 5: 8, 12; 6: 46; 7: 6). In the Old Testament, *ho Kurios* is a frequent title of God who is the living God and the author of life. He is also the benefactor, defender and patron of widows (Exod 22: 2-24). *Ho Kurios* of the New Testament has authority over life and death; just like the God in the Old Testament, Jesus is the defender of widows (Price 145). It is impressive to note that the evangelist

predicates this divine title of Jesus just before He restored the young man to life. The Lord of life is able to give life back to the dead and He does this for the compassion He has for the widowed mother. This was followed by an unexpected gesture from Him.

He touched the bier, an act that would have incurred ritual defilement according to strict interpretation of the law. As usual for Jesus, such considerations were not important in view of His healing ministry and His desire to help those who were suffering. Just as Jesus frequently healed people by “raising” them from their sick beds, here Jesus commanded the young man to “arise,” using a form of the same verb *egeirō* that is also used in connection with resurrection, thus, while this man’s resuscitation was only a return to mortal life, it nevertheless serves as anticipation of Jesus’ own permanent conquest of death. This connection might be underscored by Luke’s emphasizing that the young man was the widow’s only son (*monogenēs huios*), even as Christ is the Only Begotten (*monogenēs*) of the Father (John 1:18).

After the young man arose, Jesus “delivered him to his mother” (v. 15), even as Elijah had “delivered” the child of the widow of Zarephath back to her, saying “See, your son is alive” (1 Kings 17:23). At Nain, the crowd reacted with both fear and awe, giving glory to God and exclaiming “that a great prophet is risen up among us” and “God hath visited his people” (Luke 7:16). Given Nain’s proximity to Old Testament Shunem, the multitude may well have had Elisha in mind yet the public wonder and expressions of praise must have paled when compared to the heartfelt relief and overwhelming joy of the mother, which was not recorded. The miracle of Jesus’ raising the widow’s son was only the first of others He would perform, each of which looked forward to a much greater, everlasting restoration of life. This ultimate miracle will not only return one woman’s child to her but will restore all of our loved ones to us, with a promise of our never being separated again if we are true and faithful.

Verses 16-17

The miracle concludes with the reaction of the crowd. At the recognition of the intervention and manifestation of the power of God, the people are filled with awe and break forth into praise (Zacharias 191). This is a natural human reaction to a demonstration of supernatural power. They also praised God that this act of power had such a beneficial effect (2:20; 5:25-26; 18:43; 23:47). The people remembered the life-restoring miracles of Elijah and Elisha, in that very neighbourhood, centuries earlier. They quickly concluded that in Jesus Christ, God has visited His people. The verb to ‘visit’ (*episkeptomai*) signifies a special divine intervention of God, at times to judge and to punish the people when they are guilty but most often, to save and to bless.

Calling Jesus “a great prophet” was not however the same as acknowledging Him as Messiah, much less God. Their second exclamation did not necessarily mean that they acknowledged Jesus as God. It is an Old Testament expression meaning that God had sent help to His people (Ruth 1:6; . Luke 1:68). Luke concluded this pericope with a notation that the news (*logos*, word) about this incident radiated over that entire region (4:14, 37). The “surrounding district” probably refers to the area beyond “Judea,” that included Perea, where John heard of Jesus’ mighty works (v. 18). Jesus’ amazing healings and exorcisms contribute to the very rapid spread of His fame. Comparison of the following statements shows how the narrator conveys an impression of rapidly growing fame: After the exorcism in the synagogue of Capernaum, ‘a report about him was going out to every place of the neighboring area’ (4:37). After the healing of the leper, ‘the word about him was spreading more’ (5:15).

In the next scene, Pharisees and teachers of the law are present ‘from every village of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem’ (5:17). This is surpassed in 6:17- 18, where we hear of ‘a great multitude of the people from all the Jewish land and Jerusalem and the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and be healed.’ We reach the climax of this development in 7:17: ‘And this statement about him went out in the whole Jewish country and the neighboring region’ (Tannehill 85-86).

Recapitulation

Death is in reality the most terrible tragedy that can happen to anyone. It is the consequence of sin. Jesus Christ came to give a radical answer to the problem

of death. Taking to Himself the sins of the world, Jesus destroyed them through His death on the cross and rising from the tomb again, conquered death. To those who believe in Him, Jesus gives a share in His risen life. St John Chrysostom commented on the miracle: “life meeting death stops at the bier”. The Fathers of the Church see in the woman who weeps for the death of her son, the figure of the Church, who, likewise a widow after the death of her Lord, weeps for her children spiritually dead through mortal sin, and are going to perdition. J.P. Charlier sees in the widow who weeps over the death of her only son at the gate of the city, the figure of the daughter of Sion, Mary, also a widow, who loses her only Son Jesus Christ, dead outside the gates of the city (Charlier 103). **Jesus’ Compassion (Luke 7: 11-17) as a Paradigm for Christians During the Corona virus Pandemic** Gleaning from the text of Luke 7: 11-17, Jesus gave the widow of Nain what she was in dire need of: He restored her only son to life. In so doing, Jesus reinstated her in the society; because as a childless widow, especially without a male child, she no longer had a voice in her society. It is instructive to observe that the initiative to do

this came from Jesus; He did not wait for the poor widow to beg Him before He performed this soothing miracle. Following the footstep of Jesus today, many of us may not be endowed with the supernatural gifts of raising a person from the dead; however, we can, in various ways, like Jesus, bring joy to the lives of many helpless persons. There are many who, like the widow of Nain, are desperately waiting for others to alleviate their sufferings.

The world is not yet free of hunger in some countries; for there are many who hardly have enough of daily sustenance. A little sacrifice from the affluent is enough to sustain and keep this category of people alive so that they can live life worthy of human beings. They can be reached through some charitable organizations who work in various parts of the world. The hungry poor can also be helped to have permanent means of livelihood so that they may not be perpetually indigent. There are others who are beset by sickness of various kinds and have no means of ridding themselves of their situations. Some languish in their homes and have no ready helpers. These need the compassion of their fellow human beings for survival.

In His public ministry, Jesus was particularly concerned about the sick; He made Himself available for the consolation they needed from Him; He touched them and healed them. Sometimes, He had no time for Himself because of the huge crowd of those carrying their sick seeking for His healing touch. His selfless service gave them comfort and the healing they needed. Many in our society are victims of unjust actions of those who intimidate and deprive them of their human rights. There are those who are unjustly accused and suffer for a long time in this degradation and as the widow of Nain, they no longer have a voice in their society. Such persons need the compassion of their fellow human beings who can liberate them from the unjust strings of the wicked.

Lack of formal education contributes adversely to the inhuman situations of many in various parts of the world. There are many who wallow in ignorance and are subjected to all kinds of social ills because they are not informed and they have no one to help inform them. Others cannot afford formal education because of poverty. Therefore they need the compassion of those who can help them live lives worthy of human beings. It is the task of every government and all who have the means, to provide the citizenry with adequate education for a better society. Jesus spent his life teaching his contemporaries. As an itinerant teacher, He went about teaching all who listened to Him and His teaching made great impression on them for He did not teach like any of the teachers they knew. One of the things which distinguished Him from them all was the unconditional compassion He had for all; even for His enemies from whom He suffered excruciating and ignominious death.

Conclusion

The social setting at the time of the composition of the third Gospel, that is the Gospel according to Luke, was behind his constant and many references to Jesus' encounter with women, the afflicted and children. In a society where women and children were not counted, Luke presents a Saviour who has come to give freedom to all, especially to those who were considered second-class citizens. Luke's Gospel is replete with such examples of Jesus' care for the sick, the afflicted, women and children. Many of his accounts are imbued with human sentiments. The resuscitation of the widow's son gives us a good example of this. In the story of how Jesus raised the widow's son and in other two texts (Luke 10: 33 and 15: 20) where the key verb, *splanchnizesthai* occurs, the evangelist presents a characteristic feature of the divine compassion displayed by Jesus.

God's love is unconditional; no one merits His love for it is a free gift to all, especially those who are most in need of it: a widowed mother, the man wounded by brigands and a son who has squandered his father's property. Luke's many human stories, particularly 7: 11-17, call for more profound reflection and inculcation of compassion in our contemporary society. Many parts of the world are still plagued by sufferings of varied degrees and little is being done to alleviate them. A just distribution of the divinely endowed resources that we have can go a long way to satisfying the need of the masses who pine away in sickness, isolation and abject poverty while their rich compatriots continue to enrich themselves. At the same time as some women have started making effort to assert their human dignity and have their stand in the society, their conditions in different parts of the world are indeed appalling. Many widows still undergo utter inhuman treatments from those who should, like Jesus, whisper to them unconditionally and without affectation, "do not weep!"

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