

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time: June 9, 2013

By: Most Rev. Joseph M. Sullivan

Diocese of Brooklyn

Luke 7:11-127

“A GREAT PROPHET HAS ARISEN IN OUR MIDST”

Luke provides a brief but vivid picture of Jesus' encounter with the widow of Nain at the funeral of her son. We are told that there was a large crowd accompanying Jesus as he traveled through the town. They met a funeral procession near the city gate. A man has died, an only son of a widowed mother. In the first century, a widowed, childless woman was doubly bereft and without emotional and financial support. Jesus does not avert his gaze or step aside to let the procession pass. Rather he directly approaches and confidently touches the coffin. The surprised pall bearers stop. Deeply touched, and moved with pity, He then consoles the mother, “do not weep”. He calls the young man to arise. Luke tells us that “the dead man sat up and began to speak.” Jesus gives the son to his mother. One can only imagine the surprise and joy on her face as she is re-united with her son. The crowd, witnessing this incredible event, reacts at first with fear and then glorifies God exclaiming, “A great prophet has arisen in our midst” and “God has visited his people.”

Often at the wake of a beloved son or daughter who has pre-deceased the mother, one hears the repeated refrain, “A mother should not have the pain of burying her offspring.” Many mothers will tell you that the loss of a child was the greatest suffering in their life. It is not within what we see as the order of nature. Many persons express discomfort about approaching mourners, noting that they don't know what to say, are afraid of further upsetting the grieving family. One response is awkward avoidance, just the opposite of Jesus' reaction. When encountering the funeral

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procession and the heartbroken mother Jesus saw more than a grieving widow; he knew the loneliness that she would experience. He knew the culture denied both equal status and social support for women. Her future would be difficult, deprived of the presence and the love of her son. Jesus was moved to compassion for her. Instead of stepping aside or avoiding her, he stepped forward to use his healing power to restore life to her son and to return her to her place within her community.

Contemplating this incident in the life of Jesus we realize that he was a compassionate man; he felt for the widow as he did for Martha and Mary at the death of their dear brother Lazarus. Jesus's compassion moved him to put himself in the place of the grieving mother – in a sense, to stand in her shoes. The by-standers, those who witnessed this breath-giving event, Jewish women and men who were familiar with the story of the prophet Elijah who had restored life to a son, together exclaim, “A great prophet has arisen in our midst”. We Christian believers proclaim Jesus as more than a prophet; he was the son of God. Through this seemingly serendipitous encounter, occurring while he was on a journey, Jesus revealed his power over death. He taught us, “if you do not believe the words that I speak, believe in the works that give testimony to me and to the one who sent me.”

For all who serve within the healing ministry of the Church, who minister in the name of Jesus, our service is fueled by compassion for the sick and troubled. When we witness persons who experience sickness, loss, loneliness, fear or desolation, we are touched because we know that we are sisters and brothers, sons and daughters of the same loving God. We believe that every person is a treasure, that every life is a sacred gift. When we resist the impulse to shy away from pain and death, and when we stand in the shoes of those who are suffering, our compassion mirrors that of Jesus. The story that Luke recounts with such clarity renews our hope and confidence in our Risen Savior. Our daily actions on behalf of the ministry we serve – bathing the sick, comforting the immigrant, binding the wounded, wiping away tears - are motivated by

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the conviction that love overcomes death, virtue trumps sin, and good triumphs over evil.

Bishop Sullivan died on June 7, 2013, a little more than two weeks after he wrote this homily. We are humbled that he wrote one of his last homilies for CHA. We will miss him dearly and remember him for his many contributions to Catholic health care and social services in the United States.