



The Second Sunday after Trinity
5 June 2016

Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Reading: 1 Kings 17.17-end; Galatians 1.11-end; Luke 7.11-17

Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak but thou art mighty, hold me with thy powerful hand. These are the famous words with which we will end our service today. But I wonder if you believe them? Do you believe in the power of God? His power to guide and redeem? I wonder which is easier for you to believe in - God's power and transcendence or God's immanence, God's indwelling? I was reading Jean Vanier's new book *Life's Great Questions* in which he articulates brilliantly the sense of God with us in human vulnerability. He quotes the theologian Maurice Zundel describing this as the Fragile God: "the most astonishing revelation of the Gospel - a fragile God placed in our hands." Zundel writes: "There is a universal I hidden in the depths of every human soul, an I who gathers us together, fragile, secret, like the flame of a candle and that is the true God, there is no other. God is a vulnerable flame."

I find no difficulty in this idea of a vulnerable God. What I find harder to understand is a God who is all powerful. The power revealed in Jesus Christ in today's Gospel for example. In today's Gospel we hear the story of Jesus raising a mother's son from the dead. It's not even like Jairus' daughter where the girl may not have been dead at all but just sleeping. No, in this story, found only in Luke as they approach the gate of the town of Nain Jesus meets the funeral procession. He touches the bier and he calls upon the dead young man to rise up and the dead man begins to speak. Now I don't want to be a doubting Thomas but I just don't think life is like that. Dead people just don't come back to life however much we pray or would like them to. I can believe in the disciples' experience of Christ's own resurrection. He is after all the Son of God. But why a random resurrection of this young man. I mean this young man will still surely have to die sometime. It would be pointless for Jesus to go around just bringing people back from the dead like a hospital resuscitation. Why save one person and let others die, it seems so unfair? Why answer one mother's prayer but deny others? So what is this miracle there for? Is it a metaphor, a parable, is it an apocryphal story that got into this one Gospel by mistake. Is Luke trying to show that Jesus is like Elijah who also raised the dead? Miracles like dead people coming back to life simply don't happen in reality, in fact quite the opposite. Once someone is dead however much you call upon the name of Jesus they are dead. Last week I was talking to someone whose father has just died. She described being at his bedside and the moment he died. "His body was so cold", she told me in floods of tears. "I prayed and I prayed but I knew he was gone." She knew that his Spirit had left this world.

I really struggle to understand this miracle. The only way that it makes sense is if we see what immediately follows this miracle. John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answers: "Go tell John what you have seen and heard, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." What we are being asked to witness to in this chapter is not random acts of compassion but the whole trajectory of God's coming kingdom. The words that came to my mind as I reflected upon this miraculous intervention was the word "deliverance." It's a word that's got a bit hijacked by exorcists and evangelicals. The word deliverance actually means release, rescue, liberation, freedom. In the Bible deliverance describes the way by which God intervenes in history to set free from bondage and oppression. It is God's

saving act: God hearing the cry of his people releasing them from slavery. In this context the raising of the widow's son at Nain is not just an isolated and seemingly one off action - it is the revelation of God's coming kingdom in which the powers of this world will be overcome by the greater power of God's love.

I am searching for a context for today in which this kind of transformation can take place. Indeed a context in which this is not just wishful thinking or fantasy but actually witnessing to the power of God in action. What does resurrection like this mean or look like? I begin to contemplate the way God has intervened in my own life. Of course I can gloss over God's role, find a means to explain it or rationalise my story in which God played no part - but have I not, all of my life, sensed at moments a God greater than all my understanding - guiding me along the cliff edges and precipices - somehow with me even in the pitfalls and darkness - capable of redeeming even my failures? Have I not known a love and a power beyond my own powers? "Guide me O thou great redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak but thou art mighty, hold me with thy powerful hand." And have I not seen again and again that miraculous grace at work in the lives of others too? Christ bringing resurrection and hope. I think of people I have met. People in this congregation who have come face to face with all that can overwhelm or crush them. With struggle and suffering and their own mistakes, or with loss or grief, or sickness or addiction and through God's grace, through love they have not been overcome. I think of my dear friend John with his gentle prayerfulness and grace who told me last night that he gave up drinking alcohol which had begun to control his life 26 years ago and never drunk since. And I thank God for his life of resurrection. I think of the pilgrimage last weekend - like an outpouring of generosity, the incredible kindness of those who walked with me: the strength of goodness overcoming adversity of lives, Eugene coordinating with effervescent joy: I think of Asanka and John set free to love each other last Wednesday on the day of their civil partnership in a celebration of cream teas, prosecco, photographs, dear friends, joy and prayer. I think of the Friends of St Martin's - yesterday celebrating the life-giving relationships and hospitality that Christ can offer to all in this place as we build friendships that last. All tastes of resurrection.

But I am also incredibly aware of the dominion of all that destroys and takes life away. I think of addictions that trap and imprison the human soul. I still remember my friend whose beauty was stolen by alcohol, so that each time I met him it seemed to have permeated a little more into the heart that I loved. And I longed so much that he should be free. I think of those around this church and around this nation whose heads are being shot away by drugs - legal or illegal highs. I smell the poisonous smell of their constant inhalations... I see them stagger and the blankness behind their eyes as the drugs take control and I grieve for the humanity which is being dissolved by this poison. In the documentary this week which looked into the present trade in the drug *spice*, it showed young people taking as many as 15-20 fixes a day. This bondage is so present for us around St Martin's at the moment, so real that one longs for their deliverance, as the rubbish and the debris and the waste of human life accumulates. Perhaps where our ability to cross the chasm ends, prayer begins. There are other even more destructive powers and dominions at work too. The dominion of violence - the dominion that radicalises and imprisons people in cycles of revenge and hatred and the prejudices that can kill the humanity and compassion of the human soul. I think of the way a nation can so quickly turn its back on its neighbour and be blind to the suffering and the poverty of the migrant and refugee and the wars and conflicts spiral out of control in which one's own nation is implicated. Indeed I think of this nation in which the most vulnerable have become the scapegoat of our national fears. I meet each week many refugees who are destitute and are unable to move forward or back for years on end trapped in a labyrinth of exclusion.

There are times when we do not know the answers and where we face destructive cycles which seem overwhelming. "Guide me O thou great Redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land - I am weak but thou art mighty hold me with thy mighty hand." Our epistle today tells the story of a man set free by the grace of God. Indeed it could well be argued that had he not met Christ on that road to

Damascus we would not be in this church today. Here was a man consumed with fear and hatred for the followers of Christ, who like *Daesh* or the Taliban were prepared viciously to persecute and watch the stoning of the followers of Christ. And then on that day he was blinded by the vision of the risen Christ. God broke in and delivered Paul. The Risen Christ set him free to be the apostle of God's inclusive love. The one who had persecuted God now become Christ's witness from Asia Minor to Rome.

We know that God is with us, intimately with us. But I wonder if we can also believe in a God far greater than our own understanding: a God immanent but also transcendent. A God who is the great Redeemer, the Creator, the Risen One, and who has the power to deliver us and set us free. It is by his grace that resurrection becomes possible for the young man at Nain, or St Paul on the road to Damascus. Can God also deliver us from all that overwhelms us?

Guide me O though great Redeemer,
Pilgrim through this barren land
I am weak but thou art mighty
Hold me with thy powerful hand
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven
Feed me till I want no more.