

## God visits his people<sup>1</sup>

By Fr. Gonzalo Meza

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, C

Can you identify the moments in which God has visited you? To answer that question is important because the first reading and the Gospel talk about an important topic: God visits his people, and when that happens he changes the direction of our lives. He transforms our mourning into joy (Psalm 30, and alleluia verse). In fact, he did so with the widow of Nain. In the Gospel of Luke 7:11-17, a large crowd was taking part in a funeral procession. They were on the way to the cemetery to bury a young man, the only son of a widow. However, near to the gate of the city they encountered Jesus. This encounter changed the direction of their lives. Jesus transformed the funeral procession into a celebration of life. That is what happens when we encounter Jesus in our daily lives. He changes the direction of our lives.

The first reading, the psalm, the alleluia verses, and the Gospel of the Sunday Mass, are always connected, they refer to the same topic. After Vatican Council II, the Church arranged the lectionary and the Roman Missal (“the book used by the priest at the altar”) so that we could see the intrinsic union between the Old and the New Testament and its connection with the Mass.

In the first reading taken from the book of Kings, the prophet Elijah was staying in the house of a widow of Zarephath, who provided for his needs. After a time, it happened that her son fell sick and died. The widow thought that his death was provoked by the presence of the prophet Elijah in her house. She said to Elijah: “Why have you done this to me? Have you come to call attention to my guilt and kill my son?” (1Kg 17:18). The widow thought that the presence of a man of God, and a prophet like Elijah had provoked the death of his son. She believed it was a punishment for her sins. That way of thinking was very common in the mentality of the people of that time, including the Israelites. It was like a mechanical conception, which was not accurate: to every sin, corresponds a punishment. The bigger the sin, the harder the punishment. However, that is not the way God acts. To prove it, Elijah asks God to revive the child. “The Lord heard the prayer of Elijah; the life breath returned to the child’s body and he revived... taking the child, Elijah brought him to his mother and said to her: ‘Your son is alive’” (1 Kgs 17:22-23). When God visits his people, when he visits a house and a family, he brings life, not death.

That is what we see in the Gospel of Luke 7:11-17. It says, “Jesus journeyed to a city called Nain... As he drew near, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow... When the Lord saw her, he was moved with pity for her and said to her: ‘Do not weep’” (Lk 7: 11-13). It is beautiful to see how Jesus felt compassion. He was moved with pity. The English translation “moved with pity” or “compassion” do not reveal all the nuances and power of the Hebrew and Greek terminologies to describe “mercy”. Mercy in those languages includes a range of feelings: goodness and tenderness, patience and understanding, that is, readiness to forgive. God’s mercy is presented as “the image of His anxious love, which in contact with evil, and in particular with the sin of the individual and of the people, is manifested as mercy” (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*).

Jesus said to the mother “Weep not”. He offered his divine consolation, and performed the miracle to bring the child back to life: “He stepped forward and touched the coffin... and he said ‘Young man, I tell

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you, arise.' The dead man sat up and began to speak and Jesus gave him to his mother" (Lk 7:14-15). There is a parallelism between this miracle and the one performed by Elijah. However, there was a big difference. Elijah was just a prophet. Jesus is the prophetic Messiah, the Life, who can give it and take it. "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6), said Jesus. The power to revive the son of a widow was not in Elijah's hands, that is why he had to ask God to act through him to resuscitate the child. As we see throughout Jesus' ministry, the afflicted and the unfortunate were (and still are) in the inner part of the heart of our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

When people saw the miracle they were in fear, and they "glorified God, crying out 'A great prophet has arisen in our midst. God has visited his people'" (Lk 7:16). With his Incarnation God has visited our humanity. He took us from death and sin. He restored us to the newness of life. God has visited his people and he continues doing it. Can you remember how many times God has visited you visibly and invisibly? God visited you when you got married; when your child was born and you carried him in your arms; when you spent beautiful moments rejoicing with your family. God also visits his people visibly, through the presence of his sacred ministers, the bishop, the priest and the deacons. They continue the work of Christ on earth, by making Jesus visible to others through the celebration of the sacraments. God also visits you when you welcome the poor, the immigrant in your community and in your house.

God visits you also invisibly. For example, when you were baptized and confirmed; when your sins are forgiven in the sacrament of confession, when you receive the Most Holy Eucharist, the real Presence of Christ. God can also visit you through the challenges of life. God visits his people but he respects our freedom. We can say yes or no to God's visitation in our life.

Today we are invited to say always yes to his visitation, whether it be in the form of a blessing or a challenge. What can we do to be open to God's visitation? To encounter Jesus in the Sacraments, in the Bible, in prayer, in the poor, in the sick, in the immigrant, and in the marginalized. The Mass, the Rosary, our daily prayer, are essential components of our encounter with Jesus, because it is there where we find him, especially in the Most Holy Eucharist, where he is truly, really and substantially present. It is also important to visit the sick, the prisoner and to welcome the poor and the immigrant. Jesus' presence is there too.

St. Augustine invites us to be open to God's visitation in our lives. Even if a soul is partially or totally dead, there is hope. Christ touched the coffin of the young man, and gave his life back to him. God touches the darkness of the heart (jealousies, criticism, corruption, lust, etc.) to transform it into life. Augustine says that from the persons raised to life by Christ, only three are mentioned in the Gospels: the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Nain, and his friend Lazarus. However, Jesus raised many more people, who were invisibly dead (Cfr. Augustine, Sermon XCVIII).

Nowadays many people live in a living body with dead soul. Physically they seem to be alive but their spiritual life is dead. According to St. Augustine, there are four things, which must be avoided to prevent the death of a soul: 1. Evil thoughts. 2. Consent of such thought. 3. The evil action and finally the evil habit. When people get used to live in state of sin, they are incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong. In fact, the priest said at the opening prayer, "O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your

guidance do it.<sup>2</sup>” At the end of Mass, at the final prayer said by the priest, such petition is emphasized: “May your healing work, O Lord, free us, we pray, from doing evil and lead us to what is right.”

Be not afraid, and believe, because Jesus visits us and he tells us “I tell you arise.” He does so in the sacrament of confession, where through the priest he extends his hand to restore the soul back to life and brings us back alive to the maternal hands to Holy Mother Church.” When God visits his people, he restore their lives, visibly and particularly invisibly.

In the Gospel of Lk 7, we saw that the widow was weeping for her son. Who weeps for the moral suffering of Catholics? St Ambrose says that Mother Church weeps and intercedes for her children: “Although there is grave sin that you cannot wash away yourself with the tears of your penitence, let Mother Church weep for you. She who intercedes for all as a widowed mother. She suffers with the spiritual grief of nature when she perceives her children are dead by mortal sins... Let the pious mother grieve, let the crowd too, help. Already at the funeral you will arise, already you will be released from the sepulcher” (St Ambrose, *Exposition on the Gospel of Luke*, 59.2).

When we receive back our life, we can say as the psalm said today: “I will praise you Lord, for you have rescued me... you brought me up from the nether world; you preserved me from among those going down into the pit” (Psalm 30). God has visited his people! God has visited us!

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<sup>2</sup> The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II. (2011). (Third Typical Edition, p. 470). Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.