

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

(1Kings 17:17-24 / Luke 7:11-17)

05.06.2016

*To feel and to act*

A few weeks ago, a young student at Queen's University shared with me his fears about his forthcoming exams. At the end he said: "I should not be afraid because I am supposed to trust in the Lord". I reminded him that Jesus knew what it was to be afraid and that it was important to acknowledge one's feelings rather than suppress or ignore them. Generally speaking, we can say that in our lives the problem is not our feelings, rather it is what we do with them, how we channel them. The crux of the matter is that we are meant to feel and yet we are not meant to act according to all our feelings.

Today our Gospel reading depicts Jesus dealing with a very strong emotion. The English translation: "he felt sorry for her" is quite poor and does not convey the strength and the depth of the Greek expression. Literally, St Luke uses a word which speaks of bowels, of guts, of the seat of emotions being moved. Jesus was heartbroken.

It is important to remember that we do not believe in an emotionally frozen Messiah. While Jesus knew what it was to be angry, sad, and joyful, our Christian traditions have taught us that we would be better Christians if we had no feelings. While Jesus would be fully human in dealing properly with his feelings, we think we can do better than him by ignoring them!

There are some situations which are bound to generate feelings within us: it is normal to be angry because of the present migrant situation and of the way some political leaders are dealing with it; it is legitimate to be worried by the rhetoric of Donald Trump or of those who in the United Kingdom want to leave the EU; it is quite reasonable to be concerned by the recurrent inability of some of our political representatives here in Northern Ireland to act responsibly.

Maybe before asking ourselves what we do with our feelings, we should ask ourselves: do we feel at all? Like Jesus, do we feel for others? Are we moved by what happens to them?

Here it may be necessary to say that, if indeed compassion begins at home, we are not thinking of having feelings only for those we love, those who are part of our family or community. As Christians, our hearts should be universal and so we should feel something even for those with whom we disagree, those who have committed a grave offense, those whose moral behaviour we cannot condone, those from other religious traditions and cultures. We have to be very careful not to filter our love and compassion in such a way that only a few can enjoy them. Discrimination and stinginess are not Christian values!

Our hearts must be made of flesh not of stone and our heartbeat should be attuned to God's heartbeat. It is not because people are wrong – and they can be terribly wrong – that we must be less humane and consequently less human.

As we see in our Gospel reading, Jesus' feelings are at the service of his mission: to bring life. Moved by compassion for the woman, Jesus brings her son back to life.

Martin Luther King, Bl. Oscar Romero and Bl. Teresa of Calcutta certainly knew what it was to be angry, scandalised, concerned and worried. They could have remained angry people, allowing their feelings to turn them into bitter men and women wrapped in self-righteousness or driven to act violently. Moved by the Holy Spirit and guided by the Gospel, they channelled their feelings for the service of their brothers and sisters.

Whether they are good or bad, positive or negative, our feelings and emotions are a powerful energy within us. They are like a fire which can harm others or to which others can come to warm themselves. All our feelings can become self-destructive and dangerous or life-giving and a dynamic force for good.

To learn to deal in a healthy Christian way with our feelings requires patience and perseverance. It is certainly one of the best signs of growth in maturity. When we feel something very strongly, we are always tempted to switch on the default mode of the child. And yet as adults, in order to cope with pain and hurt, we are supposed to resort to better means than hurting in return, kicking, shouting or sulking.

In normal circumstances, we will not be able to literally raise somebody from the dead, however with the Holy Spirit at work within us, we are equipped to bring life into difficult relationships, to create a positive atmosphere in the dynamics of our families and communities, to put our energy into reconciliation and peace.

The choice is ours: nothing vivifies and nothing kills like our emotions. Let us present all our emotions to the Lord, he knows them all and just as he did in the past with so many men and women, he is able to accomplish great things by using our feelings for our good and the good of all.