

What strikes me about the story of Jesus and the widow of Nain is that there's no religion in it at all. God isn't mentioned in the story itself, and what Jesus does for the widow is not prompted by any petition or act of faith on her part. We are not told that she was a pious person: maybe she was, but it doesn't seem to matter. She is just there in her desolation and Jesus appears from nowhere, brings her son back to life and gives him back to her. We are not told that she and/ or her son subsequently became disciples of Jesus and followed him on the way, as happens in some other miracle stories. Indeed it's all very human. It is true that people are astounded and start glorifying God, but that's not the point of the story. The point of the story is the woman's plight, and Jesus' instinctive compassion, and the fact that he gives the young man back to his mother. The story resonates with the finest of human emotions. How would we be able to give children back to their parents when we read in the newspapers about their human deaths! This is not, first and foremost, because we are religious, or because we feel bound by some divine commandment, but just because we are human. Our hearts go out spontaneously to anyone who suffers such awful distress. That's what compassion means-sharing someone's distress. It's something you feel in your guts. It is worth noting that in the Biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek, the word compassion derives from the same word meaning guts. In the Old Testament it is God who famously feels this way about his people, when he sees their distress; and in the New Testament it is Jesus who is frequently described in these terms, as in this very passage. The fact that there is no religion in the story tells us a great deal about true religion. It is a shame that the Gospels are so full of scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees, and of Jesus constantly arguing with them, that we risk losing sight of the single most luminous message of the Christian gospel, namely, Jesus' tender compassion for the afflicted, his sheer humanity. It is a pity also that religious people are often so preoccupied the ritual and regulatory aspects of religion that we prevent Jesus' compassionate humanity from shining through in our lives. We know that there are many humanists who undertake great acts of kindness; theirs is the same humanism as ours, surely, except that ours merges with the divine, and both hear the cry of weeping and distress, but for us we know that to feel for those in sorrow and affliction is the noblest part of being human, and it lies at the heart of our religion and faith.

Sadly, the dominant culture of today's world is not about compassion, or about any profound human feeling. In spite of much good in individuals, we are an uncompassionate society. For all its insistence upon rights and equality, the dominant culture does not encourage emotions that are noble and compassionate but instead works to make people coarse and selfish. The trends to what is ugly and coarse are at least as powerful as the tendencies towards humaneness and compassion. But let us look at ourselves. It is our Christian vocation to create for our children an atmosphere that will raise their minds to things lovely and sublime, and to protect them against all the ugly things the world thrusts upon them. That way they will grow up to be genuinely human and therefore also authentically Christian. 'Religion that

is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this', says St James: 'to visit the orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself uncontaminated from the world'; or in broader terms as St Paul puts it, to cultivate in our hearts and minds 'whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is noble, whatever is gracious' – in a word whatever is genuinely human.

We need religion to keep us human; to foster in us those pure compassionate feelings that Jesus felt in his guts; to inject some graciousness, some tenderness, into a coarsened world. In

this Mass may we experience once more the Lord's tender compassion towards us so that we may reach out to others in their distress and identify with their sufferings. We cannot raise the dead, but we can at least feel for the living, and not only feel for them, but, in the ways that are possible to us, to take action to bring them comfort.

Amen