

The Gospel reading today tells us a story about Jesus bringing a dead person back to life. This is not the only such story in the Gospels. There is a similar story about Jesus raising a little girl from the dead; there is another story about the Lord restoring life to Lazarus, the brother of the two sisters, Mary and Martha, all close friends of Jesus. This type of story is not unique to the New Testament. We find such accounts in the Old Testament and in other religions as well, including the reading this morning from I Kings, the story of the prophet Elijah restoring the life of the child of the widow of Zarephath. Think what you will of these stories. If you are a biblical literalist, then you believe that people that were clinically dead returned to life. If you reject biblical literalism, at least as it applies to these stories, then you look for other explanations. I think what is important is that we realize that chasing after the literal accuracy of the Gospel narratives does not necessarily lead us where we need to go. There is something more here than whether Jesus restored life to the dead. What is important is that Jesus gives life to the soul; he brings life to the spiritually dead. That which is of ultimate importance is that Jesus saw the glory of God reflected in human life. Irenaeus, one of the Church Fathers, said that the glory of God is found in the human person fully alive. Irenaeus learned this from Jesus.

I imagine that when Saint Luke's audience read this story about the man from Nain, they took it at face value. They were people of a time and a culture that saw the world far differently than people do today. But the message transcends the text's literal meaning, and the message is timeless. It tells us of the remarkable compassion of our Lord for people that suffer and grieve. Most of all, the story tells about the value that Jesus placed on human life. Jesus affirmed the sacredness of human life. For Christians, life's sacredness must be a core value. Core values determine our personal moral conduct. Our understanding of life's sacredness determines how we act towards not just our friends, but all of humanity, even those we do not like. Our understanding of life's sacredness guides our self-respect, it fuels our sense of compassion, and it determines the value that we place on the being of the other. We all know that Jesus taught us that we should love others as he loves us. We know, deep in our hearts, that Jesus preached an inclusive love. The sacredness of life is universal and unconditional; it demands unconditional love.

Living our lives by this moral standard is not easy. It requires that we suspend judgment until we understand. To understand another person, especially one who is different, we have to be prepared to set aside preconceived notions about that person. We have to listen to his story without challenge or condemnation, seeking to know as he knows and to feel as he feels. Only in understanding a person can we value a person as Christ values us, and only in understanding can we dare attempt judgment. Without understanding we would simply be operating from our prejudices.

The Christian standard is a demanding standard, but it is the holy standard, and it is to this level of living that Jesus calls us. *Amen.*