

## St. Margaret's, Trinity 2, 2016 Luke 7. 11-17 Widow of Nain's son

I've started a new novel and I know that's always a problem for a congregation, because they might have it inflicted on them. So let me say that I'm not going to inflict it on you, except that I am going to give you a little of its flavour because it could be relevant to this morning's gospel passage.

Don DeLillo is a much-acclaimed American writer, whose books are not especially a bundle of laughs and whose style is very terse and tight. This one's entitled 'Zero K' and it's about a secretive facility where death is finely controlled. That's to say, people opt to go there, about to die, and on death their bodies will be carefully preserved until such time in the future when biomedical science advances to a point when new technologies can return them to life again, and as the book's cover says, 'to a life of transcendent promise'.

Here's a bit of dialogue between the director of the facility and his son about someone about to die:

'She's completely ready,' said the father. 'There's no trace of hesitation or second thoughts.'

'We're not talking about spiritual life everlasting. This is the body.'

'The body will be frozen. Cryonic suspension,' father said.

'Then at some future time.'

'Yes. The time will come when there are ways to counteract the circumstances that led to the end. Mind and body are restored, returned to life.'

'This is not a new idea. Am I right?'

'This is not a new idea. It is an idea, father said, 'that is now approaching full realisation.'

Then later in the dialogue, the father says, 'Among the people prepared to undergo the process, anticipation and awe are mingled... There's a reverence, a state of astonishment or uncertainty. They're in this together. They feel a common mission, a destination. And I find myself trying to imagine such a place centuries back. A lodging, a shelter for travellers. For pilgrims.'

Of course, the religious overtones of the pilgrim language is intentional. The destination of restored life on earth has something holy about it. I'm only a few pages in and I'm hooked.

I wonder what your reaction is? Is it: this could never happen? Would a person be the same age as when they died? Would they have the same aches and pains? Perhaps they will be 30 years younger – that might be nice! This is a story. But actually there are people I'm told already in California who have been suspended in the deep freezer awaiting such advances in biomedical science. Are they gullible or what? There have been many times in history when people mocked an idea and later it became reality. Flying through the air like a bird or under water like a sea creature – two ideas first mocked in their day. So may be we should be careful with our mocking.

Now the gospel story. When Jesus saw the mother of the dead son, he had compassion for her. He came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Did it happen? Is this a story, written by a first century novelist? In part, I suggest Yes. Stories about Jesus began to take an exaggerated shape fairly soon after his lifetime, as they do with any seminal hero-figure. And actually this is even more so in an oral culture of the kind in which Jesus lived. We think accuracy lies in getting details correct; but oral cultures were more interested in meaning and their minds were not tuned to accuracy in the modern sense. Think Chinese whispers rather than a reporter's note-taking.

So what's going on with meaning in my new modern novel and our old gospel novel? I haven't got there yet, but in the imagined world of futuristic science the desire to preserve life for future resurrection has to do with the refusal to be cowed down by the onslaught of negative images and dreadful happenings all around us – terrorism, floods, famines, plagues. These are not what we are made for. Against such a picture we can set the beauty and humanity of everyday life. The negative does not define us, not deep-down anyway. We're fully capable of tearing ourselves apart, we know that. But our purpose lies in a different direction. If death is the ultimate symbol of what makes us afraid then here is a story which says death the final enemy has been put in its place. The story

summons us to something more noble, more humane, more life-affirming. We are made for life, in the futuristic experimental this-worldly world.

What about meaning in Luke's story of the raising of the widow's son? Well it looks pretty straightforward: the purpose of Jesus is to bring life. The story seems to be a parable of Jesus's own life – his death and his rising. One commentator says this: 'It will be illuminating to read this passage not as historical reportage but as a description of what it is to become a Christian, namely to be raised up by Christ from a life so hopeless that it amounts to death, and to be given back to ordinary life and relationships by his hand' – note the sentence which says 'and Jesus handed him back to his mother.' If you like hunting in the Bible for precedents in Jewish history for stories about Jesus then with this passage you have the perfect match in 1Kings 17, where Elijah the prophet raises a widow's only son and gives him back to her, and this clearly a source for Luke's imagination. In Luke the people's response to the miracle is 'A great prophet has arisen among us and G has turned his face towards his people.' A great prophet. Jesus is a new Elijah for Luke and through him for us.

Both my futuristic biomedical story of preserving bodies for future awakening and our Gospel story of raising a body back to present life are about defying death. But you will say, we cannot defy what we know to be certain, that one day all of us become like the widow's son. That simple fact has of course led many thinkers to speculate on what might happen after death. There are many theories: – a person's life-force or spirit survives in another realm – heaven or hell – reincarnation (eastern traditions): your life-force transfers to another life-form: you return in another guise and that could be human, animal or plant, depending on how well your karma has gone in this life – agnostic – strive for quiet dignity at the end. Leave our ultimate destiny in God's hands, if there be such a possibility. As we are asked to trust in our life-times so we are asked to trust in our death-times. Nothing of a person's goodness is lost in God's sight. More than that we don't need to speculate about. Quiet dignity – this has been the goal of the hospice movement, and actually also of the assisted dying movement.

If you don't face any of the above, you could try defying death by robbing it of its power of finality and rehearse Dylan Thomas's well-known angry poem about his dying father 'Do not go gentle into that good night' with its resounding line that we should 'rage, rage, against the dying of the light'.

Death is said to be the final enemy of human endeavour or purpose. The grim reaper. If that is the case then the only question before us is this: how to live meaningfully in the face of it. To recognise that nothing is permanent in life that all things change from moment to moment and day to day and century to century, is to say that the world will be different from what it is now. In this sense the world is constantly producing newness, a creativity which is the energy that drives all life. It was a brilliant move by Christian Aid when they adopted the slogan 'We believe in life before death', thus reversing the traditional interpretation of Christian faith, that this life is a rehearsal for the next one. Not so. And Jesus said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' They glorified God saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us.'

Amen.