

He Comes, He Sees, He Conquers

Text: Luke 7:11-17

Hymn: "The Light Is Ever Night"

Centuries ago, after one of his successful military campaigns, Julius Caesar is said to have sent this brief report to Rome: "Veni, vidi, vici"—"I came, I saw, I conquered." In a way those words were his life's motto. Under Gaius Julius Caesar the ancient Roman Empire found its birth and experienced its fantastic growth.

Few of us stop to realize that Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ were nearly contemporaries. Caesar was assassinated only forty years before Christ was born. But they had much in common besides. They both set out to build a kingdom. They both succeeded in their ventures. Both were put to death "for the good of the people." And for nineteen centuries both have remained popular figures in history, literature, and art.

Yet in many ways Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ were worlds apart. Caesar was born among noblemen, Christ among peasants. Caesar built his kingdom at the sacrifice of other men; Christ built His at the sacrifice of Himself. Caesar ruled with death; Christ ruled against death. Caesar died and was buried, and his kingdom died and was buried; Christ died and was buried but came to life again, and His kingdom not only exists today but will remain through all eternity. Caesar's "motto" was properly put in the past tense: "I came, I saw, I conquered." Christ could have had the same motto, with one exception—His must always be put in the present: "I come, I see, I conquer."

A vital part of the Christian faith is the declaration that Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8). Christ is not a mere historical figure. We know instead that our King continues even today to come to our world through Word

and Sacrament. Whenever we read an account from the life of Christ, such as the one in the Gospel for today, we don't give much thought to such incidental phrases as, "Jesus went to a town called Nain." Maybe they prompt us to turn to the maps at the back of our study Bibles or pull down an atlas. But that's the extent of our interest.

But take a moment to consider the significance of that phrase. Archaeologists tell us that Nain was a small, relatively unimportant town. Its only lasting claim to fame seems to be that Jesus went there.

Earthly kings, like Julius Caesar, don't make towns important; towns usually make them important. They simply fall like pawns in the great conquests for empire and serve as little more than historical markers to indicate the extent of a ruler's influence. Julius Caesar was seldom concerned about little towns or their "little people." But "Jesus went to a town called Nain." Because He's not just "the Savior of the world" or "the Savior of mankind." He's the Savior of the citizens in an unimportant town called Nain—the Savior of a seemingly unimportant widow and her unimportant son.

And this very day Christ comes to our town. He comes in His Word and sacraments. He comes to build His kingdom among seemingly unimportant people and their seeming unimportant children. As He made holy an insignificant town named Nain, so He makes holy our neighborhood and our house by His involvement in our lives.

But more than this. He comes to our funerals! It was no doubt very uncomfortable for the disciples, for the crowd that followed, and especially for the citizens of Nain that "just as He arrived at the gate of the town, a funeral procession was coming out." When builders of kingdoms tour their conquered territory, they have little desire to see the slums or the cemeteries. They're certainly not concerned with "little"

events and problems, a local funeral procession for some nobody. Their aides are going to make every attempt to see that the conqueror's visit is pleasant and filled with important matters, the town's beauty and wealth, its citizens' accomplishments.

But imagine the scene at Nain, the contrast of the two crowds approaching each other near the city gate. One is filled with a joyful excitement as it mingles around Christ, the other is consumed with sorrow as it accompanies a widow and her son's coffin. Any other king of this world would have stepped aside, in silent respect at best, then continued on his way, accepting the apologies of his aides. But Jesus walks directly to meet the funeral procession, as if this were the very purpose of His visit. He comes not for the living and vibrant but for the sick, the dying, and the dead.

When Christ comes to our town, He doesn't come to be pampered in a carpeted church where we can impress Him with our Sunday best. He comes through Word and Sacrament to meet the sick and dying. He comes to confront not only the sick and dying bodies but every decay of our sinful lives: the dying marriage, the dying family, the dying mind, the dying soul. He comes to our town, as He came to Nain, with all the unpleasantness, all the ugliness, all the decay of our own sins as the object of His visit.

Like other rulers, Christ comes to communities to see the possibilities for the advancement of His kingdom. But unlike the Caesars of the world, He doesn't look at the wealth and the natural resources of the area. He looks at people and he sees their isolation. Isaiah's prophecy, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God," reflected the expected procedure for the arrival of a king. The visit of a monarch served to accentuate the distance between king and people. "Make his visit pleasant! Smooth the road! Cover the unsightly!"

Yet here we read: “The dead man was the only son of a woman who was a widow...The Lord saw her.” That’s why He came. That’s why He comes. And this is what He sees. He comes because of our loneliness and isolation. He is interested in the loneliness of a woman who has been isolated by the death of her son. He is interested in the loneliness of all God’s children who have been isolated from Him by their own sin and face an eternal separation through death and judgment.

Christ comes to our town and our decaying lives to find wandering children of His Father, and He sees our grief. There are hundreds of paintings that depict ancient rulers standing in all their glory on battlefields or in the midst of besieged cities. Nearly all of them portray men who are seemingly oblivious of grief and suffering. They are shown as men convinced that their strength cancels out the need to be worried out sorrow and human suffering. Now that Alexander, now that Napoleon, now that Sherman is here, individual people, individual tragedies need not concern us.

But what of the King of kings and Lord of lords? He comes to a town called Nain and to our unimportant neighborhoods. He comes to our funerals and sees our isolation and loneliness. And “when the Lord saw, His heart was filled with compassion.” He not only sees our pain and grief from the decay of sin and the horror of death, He shares that pain. He bears that grief. He takes it as if it were His very own.

We are seldom awed by the compassion of God for His people, because, like earthly Caesars, we’re too blinded by our own quests for power—cold to others, warm only to our own desires. In today’s epistle reading, Paul prays for enlightenment for all of us: “I pray that you may have the power to understand how broad and long and high and deep is Christ’s love” (Eph 3:21).

To hear that Jesus should be filled with compassion for unimportant people such as this widow proves how aware He is of the vastness of our separation from God because of our sin. But even more, it shows the unimaginably great love that God still holds for each and every one of His creatures.

And yet all of this would be of little comfort were it not also true that He conquers! Jesus conquers. The overriding fact that distinguishes this King from all the Caesars of the world is that he conquers our death. “And He said to her, “Don’t cry. Then he walked over and touched the coffin, and the men carrying it stopped. Jesus said, “Young man! Get up, I tell you! The dead man sat up and began to talk and Jesus gave him back to his mother.”

To earthly kings death has often been a friend. Its threat has maintained their power. They have ruled with death, walked hand in hand with it, used it as a tool to enlarge their kingdoms. But Christ ruled against death. He has trampled death. Because death is the result of man’s separation from Him, death itself was destroyed.

The world thinks of death as the final result of incurable sickness. Some even are so deluded as to think that if we find cures for all sicknesses we will have found a cure for death, too. But to God death is the result of sin. This is why when the paralyzed man was brought to him, Jesus was more concerned with forgiving the man’s sin than healing his physical ailment. To conquer death, Christ grappled with sin and death personally. He died our death and rose again. His victorious cry to all whom He invites to His kingdom is: “Because I live, you also will live.”

In a similar way He conquers the decay of our sinful lives. His love can be the healing power in dying marriages and dysfunctional families. He can give meaning and

purpose to dying minds and decaying lives. His love and forgiveness brings new life into every situation.

And because He conquers our death He conquers our isolation. There was joy in the little town of Nain that day because Christ restored a life and gave a son back to his widowed mother. And there's joy among Christians in a home or a community or a church where the love of Christ has restored relationships. But there is far greater joy in knowing that Christ has given us all back to our heavenly Father. His forgiveness and His victory over our death re-establish the broken bonds between us and God.

"Hail, Caesar!" was the cry of crowds at the arrival of the emperor centuries ago. Yet few could approach, fewer still could love him. Thousands trembled in fear at the sound of his name and the prospect of being the next stepping stone in his quest for power. But Caesar died, and the Roman Empire fell. And along with them "Hail, Caesar!" died also. Meanwhile the king of kings continues in His own quiet way to effect His continual rule. He comes to our unimportant town and our unimportant lives. He comes to our funerals and enters our sinful stories. He sees our lonely isolation and shares our grief. He conquers our death and makes us children of God. He gives us everlasting life and an inheritance that will never perish.

There is no past tense in the motto of our King. For Him it always be: "I come, I see, I conquer!" His name is Immanuel, God with us. And each time we receive that assurance through His Word and His Supper we can join with those "unimportant" people of Nain in proclaiming to the surrounding territory: "God has come to save His people!"

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