

Sermon: 'The Meeting Place'

Rev. Anthony D. Miles

Methodist Central Hall, Westminster – 5th June 2010 11.00 am

LESSON: Luke 7:11-17

Today I want to talk about **'meeting places'**.

Here are a few strange meeting places that I've known from the many I have to choose from:-

The Spice Girl meeting place:

I once took my daughter Hannah to a concert, when she was about 10 – a Dad and daughter thing!

The clerical collar was banned ... obviously ... and we were soon among the thousands at Earls Court that were queuing to see and hear some Girl Power.

Imagine my daughter's unhappiness when in the midst of the crowds a woman catches my eye and says: **'Reverend Miles – you buried my Dad!'**

What to do? Offer pastoral concern, and chat for ages, or give your daughter the quality time she deserved?

Fortunately, it worked out well, because the lady didn't want to chat but was heading for the Ladies and did offer to take Hannah to save her get lost in the crowds on her own. Phew!

The Reunion meeting place:

My wife, Frances, had a good friend, Sandra, when she was a teenager.

They lost touch about 25 years ago and hadn't seen or spoken to each other since.

One day Frances goes to meet some new trustees for the charity, Stewardship, for which she works and is on their Senior Management Team.

Frances is then introduced to the first prospective women trustees the charity would like to appoint, in order to make them feel at home.

Instantly as their eyes meet, low and behold, completely unexpectedly, it was Sandra! Amazing.

The Tube meeting place:

As many of you will know, I'm a broadcaster and a Media Chaplain serving primarily commercial radio.

On one occasion when I was wondering whether I should continue certain aspects of my radio work, a strange thing happened to me on the tube.

The doors were just closing when a man ran down the platform and our eyes met and he said, **'I know you who YOU are, you're a DJ on Capital Radio!'**

I didn't even have time to spoil his delusion, but I did feel that in a strange way God was saying to me **'Don't give up on broadcasting; you must even look like a DJ!'**

All three are very weird meeting places and encounters.

Our Gospel lesson followed on from the story of Jesus' healing a Roman Centurion's servant at Capernaum.

The officer's slave was sick and at the point of death, but miraculously Jesus healed him from a distance.

In response to the great faith of someone who wasn't a Jew, Jesus demonstrates he has the authority and power to heal.

He then makes a journey to a little village called Nain, that's not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

It's situated about 25 miles to the southwest of Capernaum, and just about 5 miles, or so, from his hometown of Nazareth.

So we arrive at today's lesson where Jesus brings salvation, not by healing disease this time, but by raising a boy to life, from death.

We read in Luke 7:11 **'... Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him.'**

Jesus had travelled with his disciples and other followers.

It would've been a good day's journey, meaning he arrived at nearly dusk, a common time for Jewish funerals.

Luke 7:12a **'As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.'**

Here we have a double bereavement – a **widow** who had lost her **only son!**

Only those who have lost a child can begin to imagine her pain.

She wasn't only terribly sad, but she was alone and vulnerable in a society that didn't have the resources to care for widows.

By tradition she'd have been walking out ahead of the body of her son and the crowd would've been following behind.

Luke 7:12a **And a large crowd from the town was with her.**

The group would've been made up of friends and family, but also almost definitely a band of professional mourners and wailers.

This may sound strange, but they would've been there making a right old racket, so that immediate friends and family could let out their pain without embarrassment – especially the mother!

All very different from the 'stiff upper lip' approach to funerals that particularly white people have in this country.

Whilst all this was going on, the 'Jesus crowd' that was heading for the town centre, randomly meets the funeral procession, as it was making its way towards the cemetery *outside* the town.

Two very different crowds, making their way to different places, find a meeting place.

1. The meeting place in Nain ...

It's when the crowds meet, that Jesus halts the procession to the grave - a very powerful symbol!

Very much alive, Jesus is the One who is destined to die in Jerusalem, but who meets the one who has died, but is destined to live.

I wonder, with his knowledge of the future, did Jesus see the pain in the widow's eyes and think ahead?

Did he realise that his mother, who we think was widowed by this time, would be also know the pain of double grief and see her son's body carried off to the outside of Jerusalem?

Did the woman recognise this man who'd grown up just down the road in a neighbouring town?

We don't know exactly what happened in that moment as they met, except that Jesus takes enough time to allow his heart and to respond.

He pauses, approaches, and speaks. Luke 7:13 **'When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry!"'**

The Greek word for 'his heart went out' is to 'have pity' or to 'feel sympathy': the route of the word 'heart' is 'from the guts' or 'the seat of the emotions'.

There's no mention of the woman's faith in this passage in contrast to the story immediately before.

Of course, we know Jesus responds to faith, but he isn't bound by it or limited by its absence!

Here we see his sheer compassion, as he comforts her, probably with tears in his own eyes; 'Don't cry!'

I'm sure we've all used these well-meaning words that don't mean much, though they did to Jesus because he was going to change things.

Luke 7:14a **'Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still.'**

The body wasn't carried in a closed coffin, but a wicker-work basket used to take the body, wrapped in a burial shroud, to what were probably burial caves out of town.

Then, Jesus did something you just didn't do unless you were a bearer, he touched the body – which would've made him unclean.

Luke 7:14a **He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!"'**

He takes time, approaches, and speaks, touches and commands: **'Get up!'**

In this meeting place two enemies meet – and Jesus faces death, **'the last enemy'** (*1 Cor. 15:26*).

Jesus the Prince of Life, who was going to conquer death through his resurrection, puts a halt to the funeral procession.

Remember, death is NOT what God planned for us. It's part of a fallen world; an evil we must endure, but which Christ will conquer.

He came to transform the world and enable people to find victory over evil, sin and death.

The same is true for the pain of grief and separation that Jesus can also heal and transform in time too.

For those who put their trust in Him, Christ has the power to conquer the feared enemy of death and open the way to eternal life and all God's glorious promises.

With the same authority with which he raised the Centurion's servant, Jesus had only to speak the word and the boy was raised to life and health.

Luke 7:15 **'The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.'**

What a moving and loving gesture this must've been for Jesus to get the young man and give him to his mother.

I can't imagine the transformation that must've taken place in that community as a mother's gasp turns to a smile, to laughter, to glorify God with others present.

Now I was in the office the other day with Ollie, and I was talking to her about this service as I'd asked her to do the opening prayers.

She asked me what I was preaching on and I told her and said I could feel a sermon coming on!

Then she told me something I hadn't read in any of my commentaries. Apparently, the word '*nain*' means '*green pasture*', '*pleasant*', or '*beauty*'.

Afterwards, I felt even more of a sermon coming on!

This was a far cry from what Jesus found in Nain, which was full of death, unpleasantness, grief and hopelessness.

However, Jesus, the Prince of Life, transformed the situation and the whole village. He enabled it to be '*pleasant*' and '*beautiful*' again.

Luke 7:16 **They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." ¹⁷ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.**

Jesus had done what the old prophets Elisha and Elijah used to do. And when telling this story Luke would've appreciated that it echoed the stories in 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4.

This was **the meeting place in Nain ...**

Now bear with me, as I contrast this with our meeting with a tragedy last week:

2. The meeting place in West Cumbria ...

Here we almost see the reversal of the Nain story.

Peaceful villages and pleasant communities were transformed into an ugly scene as life was stolen for innocent people.

Taxi driver Derrick Bird shot dead his twin brother, David, before driving 45 miles through the countryside for three hours on a rampage.

He was apparently targeting some people deliberately and others were shot randomly.

Bird shot 24 people, killing 12 of them. 10 of his victims were killed in just 65 minutes.

As I recount these facts, you want me to shut up, because we feel we've heard enough, it is too awful and our minds cannot get themselves around it all.

Now I don't want to speculate as to why this happened, but I do want to demonstrate how things can go dreadfully wrong, in an instant, as paths meet.

Listen to different 3 eyewitness accounts from people who survived the meeting place with Derrick Bird:

(i) Iris Carruthers, who knew Bird well, was walking her dogs when she saw him outside solicitor Kevin Commons' house at 5.30am on the morning of the murders.

She said: 'He seemed dazed, as if he was in another world ... he kept looking straight ahead.'

'Slowly he drove alongside me and I said: **'Hiya lad, you all right?" He didn't speak, he was in a world of his own, and I just kept on walking.'**

(ii) Don Reed, a cabbie, was standing at the taxi rank in Whitehaven when Bird drove up and shot Darren Rewcastle in the face with a shotgun, killing him instantly. Bird then took aim at Mr Reed.

He said: **'I just took a flying dive and he caught me in the back. I went on the floor and then I crawled along the taxi rank. I was going to apply first aid to Darren, but when I saw Darren, he was gone.'**

(iii) Dr Barry Walker, a GP in Seascale, was called to treat victims of the shooting.

He said: **'It was a beautiful day, everyone was out in the streets, they were doing their usual things that would happen on a sunny day in West Cumbria.'**

'To see this kind of carnage in the streets ... there was blood running in the gutters of Seascale, which is just something you don't expect.'

All because of a series of horrific meetings!

Out of the blue came fear, violence, grief, and hopelessness.

Similarly, six days ago a meeting place on in international waters, about 20 miles from the coast of Gaza ended in the deaths of nine people.

Someone somewhere knows what went wrong in an instant and led to death, rather than life.

Again I don't want to get into speculation as to exactly what happened, but all we really know is that a meeting on board MV [Rachel Corrie](#) went terribly wrong: and the Israelis stormed a six-boat flotilla which ended in the deaths of nine activists and international isolation for Israel.

Whatever happened, there are now growing calls for Israel to ease its siege of Gaza significantly, and there'll be further 'meetings' to debate this contentious issue and try and find a solution.

For, even the US, Israel's staunchest ally, said the blockade was '**unsustainable and must be changed**' because much needed aid is being halted!

The meeting place in Nain ...

Contrasted with

The meeting place in West Cumbria ... and the Middle East

Now let us look at:

3. The meeting place ... an opportunity for evil, indifference, or for good.

We all find ourselves in strange meeting places at times.

When these unexpected meetings take place, do we see them as opportunities to be channels of God's grace?

Whether in a crowd, or alone with another individual, do we allow our eyes to meet with others and then pause for a moment and let the whisper of the Holy Spirit speak to us – especially when we feel uncomfortable.

For I believe in these moments our responses in an instant can be for good or evil, or simply allow our indifference to scream out, rather than God's love.

Today we pray for the Christians and caring organisations meeting with people in Cumbria.

For David Cameron and other politicians meeting with people and the police despite their busy diaries Not politics, but letting their hearts go out to people in compassion.

For Churches holding services and meeting with people ... letting their hearts go out to people in compassion and being hospitable.

Let me give you some ideas of other more ordinary possible meeting places:
The busy adult who takes time to meet with a child ... or who takes time to engage with an imposing teenager wearing a 'hoodie', rather than ignoring them.

The husband or wife who meets with their partner and actually listens ...

The son or daughter who spends time with an elderly parent ... longer than is needed.

The person that doesn't cross the road to avoid a bereaved person, but comes alongside them – and not just for the month or so after the funeral ...

The meeting place with the lonely or sick, or depressed person ...

The meeting place with the poor ...

The meeting place of two football crowds ... that 'high five each other', rather than fighting.

And finally, this church is a meeting place.

It's a place where we can look into each others eyes as sisters and brothers in Christ and give God the space to work as we minister to one another and encourage one another.

It's a place where we can kneel at the foot of the cross and, in our minds eye, look into the compassionate eyes of Christ upon the Cross and allow him to transform us, that we may be channels of transformation in our relationships and communities.

I started with some bizarre 'meeting places', God grant that we may increasingly tell stories of unbelievable meetings places, where we have paused for a moment and let the whisper of the Holy Spirit speak to us!

So may the ugly and the nasty things of this world, by the power of the Prince of life, become beautiful and pleasant!

So may the victory of the risen Christ over sin and death, give comfort, hope and new life to the world ... eternally. **Amen.**

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