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Being Dead and being Alive (1Kg 17;8-24 Lk 7;11-17)

I used to joke that being in a shopping mall on a Friday afternoon was like walking with the living dead. You know that feeling of being with people from whom all joy and hope seems to have been removed. I feel they might live in shopping malls.

Jesus once said, "I come that you may have life, and have it in abundance!"

Today we have two stories of raising the dead.

Elisha is faced by the death of the little boy in the family who is looking after him. His father has died and he is the hope of his mother. Suddenly he dies.

What do you think Elisha is feeling? The mother, in her distress, lashes out and blames it on him! What can he do? Elisha is distressed. He takes the boy up to his room, the place of quiet and retreat where he prays and he cries out to God. He lashes out, and he blames God!

Then he lies down covering the boy with his body, with his warmth, his life, his breath. Perhaps he just followed his instincts, or wanted to wrap this little lad, who I think he had come to like, in his own body and life, and then he cries out a plea to God to let the child's life return to his body.

What is driving Elisha?

I think it is that he is washed over by the pain and loss of the mother. His own loss is there. His heart is moved and his own grief is kindled. His love for this little family over-rides his common sense. After all, children die. In the ancient world to make it to 30 was quite an achievement. People had lots of children, partly in the hope that a few would survive childhood. But common sense is overwhelmed by his love and compassion. He runs upstairs with the body of this little boy, not knowing what he will do next but cry out to his God.

In the Gospel Jesus meets a funeral procession bearing the body of a youth. Following the bier Jesus sees a young mother, maybe just 30 or so, weeping. Perhaps he sees no husband, no other children, or perhaps someone tells him the story. It is seeing her that does it for Jesus. It is to her that his heart goes out. It is that sense that this is not right, it should not be happening, it is not fair, how will she cope? or survive?

Common sense abandons Jesus. Suddenly in the middle of the street, surrounded by the collision of his crowd with another crowd going to a tragic burial, Jesus steps forward and touches the bier.

This is rude, unseemly, confusing. What is he doing? What can he do? The young man is dead! Young men die. It happens, and it is tragic, but it is part of life.

"Young man, I say to you rise!" There must have been a sudden intake of breath.

But what if he didn't rise up? How outrageous this interruption would become! How embarrassing for everyone!

Why would Jesus do this? What is driving him?

No one asked him to help. No one turned to him for aide. No one showed faith in him or anything.

"When the Lord saw her he had compassion for her." it says. Compassion. Most of Jesus' acts are in response to a request. Here it is pure personal compassion that makes him act. It springs from within. He acts before he has thought through a plan. A compulsive act, driven by compassion. (Not something your teachers at school, or your parents encouraged.)

What are the things you have done in your recent life that made you feel really good about yourself?

I was crossing a road recently when an old chap crumpled onto the ground. Several people turned, but without thinking, a woman and I ran and we caught him. Then we asked him how he was, and all he wanted was for us to help him home, about 100 yards. So we walked the old fella back, at a snail's pace, and got him in his chair, and then someone came in, and we handed him over to family. Actually I was in a hurry, and I had a dog on a leash with me, and I would have let someone else get in there if I had stopped to think, or been sensible. But it was a great thing to do and I felt good all day.

You probably have stores to match and exceed this. But it is often moments of acting on love, on compassion, on generosity or care....acting NOW, and without too much thinking. It is when the feeling arrives suddenly in you and you *act* before careful thinking can get in the way.

I would not have advised Jesus or Elisha to go for raising the dead. It is not usually a winning option. It could have ruined their reputations had it gone wrong. Elisha at least had the sense to get some privacy! That is not just cynical, it is actually wisely cautious.

But behind this is a teaching about life and death.

It is when you do these things that you feel good. Actually you feel *alive*. It is in "random acts of kindness and senseless compassion" that we experience abundant life. These are moments of risk and uncertainty. They are moments when the risks don't matter and the instant instinct is so strong. I used to listen to the stories of wartime from people in England, some 30 years ago when it was all closer. "They were the best years of my life" I often heard said. What? Warfare, death, bombs chaos. This is the best? No. But in those times it was easy to act for the moment, to share food with a stranger, to risk life for a comrade, to save a life of the unknown person who crosses your path, to do good just because it was in front of you and the pressure was on. In the midst of death there is life. Abundant life.

The gift of following Jesus is life. That doesn't mean churchgoers get an extra 10 years. It means that there is a quality of life that emanates from God, when you get close to Him. It is his eternity, his vibrancy, his joyfulness and sudden, blinding engagement in love with others.

I think in these stories it is the way Elisha and Jesus *throw* themselves out in love, compassion and faith, utterly unsupported by any back-up plan, that puts them right out of our sane way of behaving and into the insane compassionate love of God. Maybe it is putting themselves so totally into God's hands that God's abundant life-giving flowed back through them into these boys. I don't know, and I don't think anyone will ever know. But it makes some sense to me, because the "life in abundance" which Jesus says he offers, is a life lived frighteningly near the edge. It is a life lived with no visible means of support. It is a life lived by faith, not by works, not by prudence and not by wise financial management!

Now I have to say that this is not me! I like work, prudence and wise financial management. I am not really very holy at all. But every now and then I do act on faith alone.

About 155,000 people die every day in our world. Each and every day. My friend Jim is dying. But I know that he has had his moments of unbridled love, his acts of quiet heroism, his touches of eternal life. God alone is the one who knows how much we each have touched the abundant life of the kingdom of heaven. I do not worry for the dying, for it is the nature of God, as I know Him, to have wormed his gentle way into every heart that is not nailed shut. (I have yet to meet a heart nailed shut, though many are damaged and battered.) So I know that those who have stepped forward in compassion, acted out of stupid impulse for the sake of others, or have stepped back so others could go onwards, all have found seeds of eternal life planted in their souls. This is the work of God's Spirit in us. Our work is to widen the place in our lives for impulsive acts of compassion and love, so more eternal, more abundant life can seep in. Death is itself OK. It is abundant life in Christ-like living, Elisha-like loving that is our work now to explore