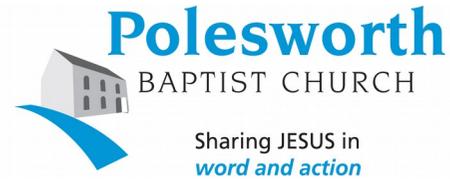


We don't know what became of the widow and her son. After the son's death and restoration to life, and after Elijah left them to return to Israel, how did they then live? Did they change their lives to continue to live in and enjoy the blessing of the God of Elijah? We don't know.

The present lock-down, if it's not stretching application too far, has brought us face to face with a death, The death of Church as we have known it. The death of our traditional routines, our weekly activities, our building-centred togetherness. When the Lord lifts the lock-down and we are restored to life together, will we see our church way in a new way? Or will we want to go into the future hugging to ourselves the ways of yesterday? Will this social death that we are experiencing and the restoration of true fellowship change how we are for the God of Elijah, our God?

I guess you may have been reflecting on such things. Perhaps with a mix of emotions. Like all grieving, there can be within it some relief, as well as sorrow. Perhaps it would benefit us all if we were able to find a way of sharing our sense of what God has been saying to us in this time of separation. Our sense maybe of His plans for us, our sense of how He might have been bringing good to us in difficult times, things that we might be able to build on, for His Kingdom future. Things that actually He might be saying to us, "you know, some of these things you've held onto as so precious, well you need to let go of them, or you need to do them in an entirely different way, for perhaps they are not living up to what I was asking you to do or to be."

You see, in God's presence, in His care for us, in His purposes for us in these things is His shelter, in these things is our being, in these things are the meaning of our lives as His people. May we find some way to share and see in this the good that the Lord might be calling us to, the new possibilities for His future that He is laying out before us, discerning his plans, building on the good, letting go and not being afraid to weep at the loss of the past, but to rejoice in the new blessing. To the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Reflections on
1 Kings 17:17-24
The death of the widow's son.

Let's go straight to the issue. Here is a catastrophe. What's going on? It's the sort of unexpected tragic event that causes some people to lose their faith. 'What is God doing to me?' is the essence of the widow's concern.

Elijah came to her when she and her son were preparing themselves to die. But through Elijah's God she and her son have found new life. And faith. She feeds Elijah and Elijah's God feeds her and her son and her supplies. Her and her son's death have been taken away. Now, in the midst of this divine blessing God, using Elijah's phrase, is 'causing her son to die'. And that just doesn't seem just. It didn't to her and it doesn't to us. What's going on?

The widow, in her anger, shock and confusion, blames Elijah. He is clearly a man of God. A holy man of a holy God. His being in her household has brought her sins to light. Now, in the death of her son, she assumes that her sins are being punished. We do not need to assume her sins were anything special. Perhaps she herself never really thought about them or saw them as sins. Perhaps she thought she must be okay as a person, for hadn't the God of Israel called her to provide for His man. Surely, He would not have done that if He thought she was awful. But now it seems she is being judged after all. And by a judgement that cuts deep into her personal blessing: "Did you come," she challenges Elijah, "to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"

Elijah is equally puzzled. His cry to God expresses the same contradiction: "O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" Yet, in faith, he goes on to pray for the boy's life to be returned to him.

We may note that Elijah takes the dead boy out of the presence of his grieving, angry, faith-challenged mother. It reminded me of Peter, when he goes to Joppa, as we are told in Acts c9 v36 and onwards and he is called to the death of Dorcas. Her mourning friends stand around him, crying and showing him the robes and clothing Dorcas had made as a disciple, who was always doing good and helping the poor. Peter sends them out.

It's as if the death-focus of grief is a block to the faith-trust of reviving life. Jesus did the same to the mourners bewailing the death of Jairus' daughter. [See Mark c5 v38 to 40]

Elijah, in his faith, not undone by what has happened, but roused up by it to appeal to the God of justice, steps out of the widow's grief and comes before the Lord in prayer. He points out to God the contradiction between God commanding the widow to help him and then causing her son to die. He doesn't pray for his own care. He doesn't pray for the widow's blessing [e.g. that she'll be able to cope with her son's death, and still know God] He prays for justice.

He prostrates himself on the boy, humbling himself in faithful trust, which also expresses his inability to raise the child. The warmth of his life, the breath of his breath cannot raise the child. He cannot give life to the boy, only God can. And the Lord hears his cry and restores the boy to life. Elijah returns him to his mother, with a word of joy and triumph in what God has done, "Look, your son is alive."

And the widow answers, "Now, I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord in your mouth is true." [We can imagine that Elijah, in his boarding with her has told her many things about God] Her response is a public confession of faith [to God, to Elijah and to us as the audience of scripture.] It expresses a deep shift in her understanding. I believe that she came to faith earlier, as shown in her actions, but now she expresses it in her words. As Paul says in Romans 10:10 "it is with your hearts that you believe" which she surely showed in her actions "and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

Maybe it took the great hurt of her son's dying to shift her out of a sense that I must be okay, for God has asked me to care for Elijah. God's calling to her to provide for Elijah was an act of grace, but perhaps she still put trust in her good work of providing for him. Her faith had not got under her skin. Now it does. And we should rejoice.

Reflections on 1 Kings 17:17-24 [2] something on loss and lock-down

Such events can be a great challenge to us. We may not all be like Elijah. Our prayers may not lead God to restore life to a lost child. There are griefs and losses and sorrows that we can't overcome in this life. But may we then in such times lift our eyes to hope. Often we look down to stoicism. Keep the lip stiff. Keep going, that's all we can do. May I suggest that there is some-thing else we can do. Something more Christian.

Firstly, I think we should cry. We should weep for our loss. And cry to the Lord in our agony because the loss hurts us, the loss cuts us up in pain. And we can know that God understands us. There is a false idea that God somehow is untouched by feelings, such as sorrow. That's a Greek idea that crept into our faith. It's not a scripture revelation. Christ wept at the tomb of Lazarus. A God who would not sorrow with us would never come to die for us.

Weep, protest, appeal and do not be afraid to do so. [It frees you from being trapped in the loss] And in doing so look to hope. The hope that declares in the beaten nails of the cross, this is not where it ends. This is not how things are meant to be, this is not how things will be. God is making all things right. Your injustice will be healed. Your peace, your joy will be fully restored to you, in manifold blessing. Hope sustains us, hope inspires us. Perhaps in your suffering there is an arm of empathy, a service of love, a gift of grace that you can offer to others, and comfort them as you yourself have been comforted.

Sometimes also it takes a great trouble to anchor us more deeply in Jesus. The storm of our suffering shaking us out of a superficial "I'm saved, I'm OK". Of course for some it will have the contrary effect. They will turn away from God. But by God's grace the storm of our suffering will blow us over into a deepening dependence on Him. A move into discipleship – that being with God, that going with God, that living with God – so we can say I am okay because God and I, we share home together. He will not desert me and I will not desert Him. He is with me, and despite all that's happened to me, I will myself to be with Him.