

too, as with John, will come the moment when we can no longer 'go with the crowd'. We have to face the ultimate journey on our own. Let us, then, choose to go along now with Jesus, on the way, however inadequate our discipleship may seem to be. Let us not lose faith in him however hard the tests we might have to endure. In all the cross-roads of life, the traffic jams and contradictions, Jesus offers us his Cross as our final pledge of victory. We embrace it gladly and go on in faith, believing that one day we shall all join up with that multitude on high that none can number, where crowds meet and join together in a single chorus of praise.



TRAFFIC JAM - *Victory in Jesus.*

Much of our time in life is spent going with the crowd. This can even be true as far as faith in Jesus is concerned. We profess to believe, go to church sometimes, do the expected things. But it is only skin deep. When troubles and persecutions set in we fall away, or more probably we just drift away gradually, opting to tag along with the apathetic crowd in the world at large instead. If the salt loses its savour how can it be salted again?

Jesus gathered a host of followers about him, as we see in the gospels. Some were really committed: the apostles and other disciples, the group of women who ministered to him. But even amongst them there were those who grew disillusioned and couldn't swallow all his teaching (*John 6: 59-66*). There was even a Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

And there were others as well: the sick in search of healing. They came in droves or were brought by family and friends (*Mark 6: 53-56 etc*). There were hangers-on out for what they could get (*John 6: 24-26*), or looking for a seven day wonder (*Matt 16: 1-4*). There were the religious leaders seeking ways to trap him in his talk - a motley crowd indeed.

In Chapter 7 of his gospel, verses 11-17, St Luke gives us a graphic description of Jesus surrounded by people and journeying through the countryside to a town called Nain. We can only guess at his reasons for going and what the expectations of the people with him were. No doubt their motives were mixed, and their understanding of

who he might be, or what he was really about, would be vague and varied. They had one thing in common, they were going along with Jesus in a crowd. There was a problem, though, for they met another crowd coming the opposite way, out of Nain to the countryside. There was a traffic jam.

The other crowd was not looking for Jesus particularly, if they knew anything about him at all. They were ordinary folk, all from the same town, friends and neighbours sharing the same joys and sorrows of life. It was a common grief and compassion that had brought them together at this particular place and time. A young man had died, the only son of his widowed mother, and they were on their way to the funeral.

Everything stopped short, everyone stood still. We can sense the waves of silence passing back through the throng of people behind and before. What might have been chaos suddenly became a moment of awed expectation. What would the Master do? He did what Elijah had once done for the widow-woman who ministered to him - raising the boy to life again he gave him back to his mother (*cf 1 Kings 17:17-24 and Luke 7:15*).

It isn't really necessary to ask how or why it happened like this, or even if the stories are literally true as we have them, in Elijah's case or the widow of Nain's. What we *do* know is that Jesus Christ, God's only Son and Mary's child, eventually died himself - a shameful death - and was raised again to eternal life. This incident outside Nain somehow signifies and prefigures that great and life-saving truth. It is the crux of the matter in fact, a veritable cross. The two approaching crowds are like the horizontal arms of that cross; their impact, in the presence and action of Jesus, brings the eternal victory of life over death into time.

Life and health were restored and a whole city rejoiced. Jesus halts death by his Cross. It was not only his followers who saw and believed but the crowd going the other way as well, the really disillusioned and disheartened who hadn't even hoped in Jesus before.

And what of the other crowd, those who at least half believed

already, the crowd where we, as members of Christ's Church, like to think we have our place? The miracle was for them as well. In our common humanity we share a common lot, and without Jesus we can do nothing to ease it or make sense of it. He alone can rescue us from sin and death, darkness and despair, and his salvation knows no bounds.

There was at least one very close follower of Jesus who was not with him on the way to Nain - John the Baptist. Jesus himself gave him high praise as the greatest man alive, embodying in himself all that the prophet Elijah had stood for (*Matt 11:10-15*). It was he who had prepared the way for Jesus and at length proclaimed him to the expectant crowds as the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.

But John was destined to be the precursor of Jesus not only in his preaching but also in his suffering and death. He wasn't travelling to Nain for he was already in prison with a possible death threat hanging over his head. Like Elijah before him, despite his high vocation and fidelity to God, John was close to despair (*cf 1 Kings 19:1-4 and Matt 11:2-5*) - he needed to be assured that he hadn't got it all wrong, that Jesus really was the One he had proclaimed him to be. The miracle on the outskirts of Nain was a direct message and sign for John.

St Luke follows on at once, in the same Chapter, 7, with his own account of John sending to enquire of Jesus from prison (*Luke 7:18-23*). John's disciples had actually been in the crowd with Jesus and they went back excitedly to tell John all about what had happened (*v.18*). But John still needed reassurance, so, in response, Jesus sent back a particular and personal message to him:

Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, THE DEAD ARE RAISED TO LIFE, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor and HAPPY IS THE MAN WHO DOES NOT LOSE FAITH IN ME. (Luke 7:22-23).

This was enough to sustain John and carry him victorious through his last and greatest trial, his witness, through his own death, to what Jesus himself would one day endure for our sake. For each of us