

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Matthew 9: 18-26)

[Poem, Vol. 2, pp. 484-8; Gospel Vol. 5, pp. 373-6];

Jesus is walking on a sunny dusty road that runs along the lake shore. He is making His way towards the village and is surrounded by a large crowd, which was certainly waiting for Him. The people throng round Him notwithstanding the fact that the apostles push with their arms and shoulders to make way for Him and raise their voices to persuade the crowd to make room.

But Jesus is not upset by so much confusion. As He is taller by a head than those around Him, He looks and smiles kindly at the crowds pressing round Him, He replies to their greetings, He caresses a few boys who succeed in creeping through the hedge of adults and thus get close to Him, He lays His hand on the heads of babies raised by their mothers above those who are nearer Jesus, so that He may touch them. And He continues to walk, slowly, patiently, in the midst of the shouting and continual pressure that would annoy any other person.

A man shouts: 'Make way, make way.' It is a panting voice and it must be known to many as it is obviously the voice of an influential person, because the crowd opens out, albeit with some difficulty, such is the crush, to let a man about fifty years old pass. He is wearing a long loose garment and round his head he has a kind of white handkerchief, two flaps of which hang down along his cheeks and neck.

When he arrives before Jesus, he prostrates himself at His feet and says: 'Oh! Master, why have You been away so long? My little girl is so ill. No one can cure her. You alone are her mother's hope and mine. Come, Master. I have been waiting for You with immense anxiety. Please come at once. My only daughter is dying...' and he weeps.

Jesus lays His hand on the head of the weeping man, who is bent and shaking with sobs, and replies to him: 'Do not weep. Have faith. Your daughter will live. Let us go to her. Stand up. Let us go!' His final words sound like a command. Before He was the Comforter, now it is the Dominator who is speaking.

They set out. Jesus is walking beside the weeping father and is holding him by the hand. And when the poor man is convulsed with deeper sobs, I see Jesus look at him and press his hand harder. He does not do anything else, but how much strength must flow into a soul that is dealt with thus by Jesus!

Previously James was where the father is now. But Jesus made him move to make room for the father. Peter is on the other side. John is beside Peter and they are both endeavouring to stem the crowds, as James and the Iscariot are doing on the other side, beside the weeping father. Some of the other apostles are in front, some behind Jesus. But it is an impossible task! Particularly the three who are behind, among whom I see Matthew, cannot hold back the living wall. But when they grumble too much or they almost insult the pushing crowds, Jesus looks back and says kindly: 'Leave My little ones alone!...'

However, at a certain moment He turns round with an abrupt movement letting go the father's hand and He stops. Not only His head has turned round, but His whole body. He looks taller, because He has taken a kingly attitude. With a severe inquisitive countenance He scans the crowd. His eyes are flashing, not harshly, but majestically: 'Who touched Me?' He asks.

Nobody replies.

'Who touched Me, I repeat' insists Jesus.

'Master' reply the disciples 'Do You not see how the crowds are pressing round You on all sides? They are all touching You, notwithstanding our efforts.'

Jesus, while speaking, looks three or four times at a little woman, about forty years old, very poorly dressed and emaciated, who endeavours to disappear in the crowds and vanish completely. His eyes must be burning her. She realises that she cannot escape, comes back and throws herself at His feet, almost touching the dust of the road with her face, while her arms are stretched out not daring to touch Jesus.

'Forgive me! It was I. I was ill. I have been ill for twelve years! I was shunned by everybody. My husband deserted me. I spent everything I had so that I might not be considered a disgrace,

and I might be able to live like everybody else. But no one was able to cure me. See, Master? I am old before my time. My strength has flown out of me with my incurable haemorrhage and my peace went with it. They told me that You are good. I was told by one whom You cured of leprosy and who, having been shunned himself for many years, did not loathe me. I did not dare to tell You before. Forgive me! I thought that if I only touched You, I would be cured. But I did not make You unclean. I hardly touched the hem of Your tunic, the hem that trails on the ground, on the dirt of the road... I am dirt myself... But now I am cured, may You be blessed! The moment I touched Your tunic, my complaint came to an end. I am like all other women. I will no longer be avoided by everybody. My husband, my children and relatives will be able to stay with me and I will be able to caress them. I shall be useful in my house. Thank You, Jesus, my good Master. May You be blessed for ever!

Jesus looks at her with infinite kindness. He smiles and says: 'Go in peace, My daughter. Your faith has restored you to health. Be free from your complaint for ever. Be good and happy. Go.'

While He is still speaking a man arrives. I think he is a servant, and he addresses the father who has been waiting all the time, respectfully but anxiously, as if he were on tenterhooks. 'Your daughter is dead. It is quite useless to bother the Master. Her soul departed and the women are already mourning her. Her mother has sent me to tell you and she asks you to come at once.'

The poor father utters a deep groan. He hides his face in his hands, pressing his forehead and eyes and bending his head as if he had been struck.

As Jesus is intent on listening and answering the woman, one would think that He has seen and heard nothing, instead He turns round and laying His hand on the bent shoulders of the poor father, He says: 'Man, I told you: "Have faith". I repeat: "Have faith". Do not be afraid. Your girl will live. Let us go to her.' And He sets out, holding the dejected man close to Himself. The crowds, seeing so much grief and being deeply affected by the recent miracle, are frightened and stop, they then part, allowing Jesus and His disciples to walk fast, and they follow in the wake of the passing Grace. They walk thus for about one hundred yards, perhaps more - I am not good at estimating - proceeding towards the centre of the town.

People are crammed in front of a respectable house, commenting in loud shrill voices on the event and replying to louder screams coming from the house through the wide open door. They are trilled piercing screams, apparently uttered monotonously by the shriller voice of a soloist, to whom a group of thin voices replies first and then is followed by another group of full voices. There is enough uproar to cause even healthy people to die.

Jesus orders His disciples to stop at the door, and He tells Peter, John and James to follow Him. He enters the house with them, holding the weeping father by the arm all the time. By holding him thus, He seems to be wishing to instil into him the certainty that He is there to make him happy. The women mourners (I would call them howlers), when they see the landlord and the Master, double their screams. They clap their hands, beat tambourines, strike triangles to accompany their lamentations.

'Be quiet' says Jesus. 'There is no need to weep. The girl is not dead. She is sleeping.'

The women shout louder, some roll on the floor, some scratch themselves, and tear their hair (or they pretend to do so), to prove that she is really dead. The musicians and friends of the family shake their heads at Jesus' illusion. They think that He is deceived. But He repeats: 'Be silent!' so energetically that the turmoil, while not ceasing completely, becomes a whisper. And He passes by.

He goes into a little room. A dead girl is lying on a bed. She is thin, very pale, has already been dressed and her dark hair has already been set in order. Her mother is weeping on the right hand side of the bed and kisses the waxen little hand of the dead girl. Jesus... how handsome He is now! I have seldom seen Him thus! He approaches the bed solicitously. He seems to be sliding or flying across the floor, so fast He approaches the little bed. The three apostles stand with their backs to the door, which they have closed in the faces of curious onlookers. The father is standing at the foot of the bed.

Jesus goes to the left hand side and with His left hand He takes the lifeless left hand of the girl. Yes, I saw Him well. It is the left hand, both of Jesus and of the girl. He raises His right

arm with open palm, to the height of His shoulder and then lowers it in the attitude of one who swears or gives an order. He says: 'Little girl, I tell you: Get up!'

There is a moment when everybody is in suspense, except Jesus and the girl. The apostles stretch their necks to see better. The father and mother look at their child with eyes full of deep sorrow. After a moment a sigh raises the breast of the girl. A light hue tinges her waxen face and its deathly pallor fades away. The hint of a smile appears on her lips before her eyes open, as if she were having a beautiful dream. Jesus is still holding her hand. She gently opens her eyes and looks around as if she were awaking. She sees first the face of Jesus, Who is looking at her with His most beautiful eyes and smiling kindly to encourage her, and she smiles at Him.

'Get up' repeats Jesus. And He pushes aside with His hand the funeral ornaments spread on the bed and around it (flowers, veils etc. etc.) and helps her to get up and take her first steps, holding her by the hand.

'Give her something to eat, now' He commands. 'She is cured. God has given her back to you. Thank Him for that. And do not tell anybody what happened. You know what happened to her. You believed and your faith deserved a miracle. The others did not have faith. It is quite useless to endeavour to convince them. God does not show Himself to those who deny a miracle. And you, My little girl, be good. Goodbye! Peace to this house.' And He goes out closing the door behind Him.

The vision ends.

I will tell you that the two points of it which made me joyful are those in which Jesus looks among the crowd for the person that touched Him and above all when standing near the little dead girl He takes her by the hand and tells her to get up. Peace and assurance have come into me. It is impossible for One as Merciful and Powerful as He is, not to have mercy on us and not defeat the Evil that kills us.

Jesus for the time being makes no comment, neither does He say anything about the other things. He sees that I am almost dead but does not consider that it is the case that I should feel better this evening. Let it be done as He wishes. I am already happy enough to have His vision.