

The Widow's Offering

1 Kings 17:10-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

In diverting from our lectionary series last week to celebrate All Saints, we missed what perhaps might be regarded as one the most significant passage in Mark's Gospel.

You will recall that we left Mark's narrative two weeks ago with Jesus heading for Jerusalem after his encounter with Bartimaeus the blind beggar. Following his so called 'Triumphal Entry' into Jerusalem, the next few chapters tell of Jesus' dialogue with the religious authorities, the people about him and his disciples. It's in this context that both today's reading and the passage I am about to read are set... We pick it up in chapter 12, verse 28...

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,' – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God!"

In recalling these great injunctions from the *torah*, Jesus is reiterating the central call of *all* the law and the prophets: that our call is to worship

God with absolute devotion of all that we are and have, and for this to express itself in our behaviour toward our fellow human beings – not just in religious observance.¹

...

And so we come to the widow and her offering. We are not told much about her except that she is poor and she gives out of her poverty.² In giving her two small copper coins she gives all that she has to live on – far, far more than those around her who give out of their abundance. Hers is a declaration of what real sacrifice, real worship, means: total dependence upon God.

I am reminded of a scene from my visit to Kagera Diocese (Tanzania), in 2006. (Bear with me if I have mentioned this visit to some of you before)...

We were about four hours out into the bush from Ngara on a confirmation safari with Bishop Aaron. The service had been going for some time – about three hours at that point. The feel was of exuberant worship and joy – choirs singing, bands playing, people dancing, scripture readings, several sermons and confirmations. Just before the climatic eucharist it was time for some fund-raising in aid of building a church, since all they have presently is a tatty tarpaulin protecting them from the hot sun.

Much ado was made as people came forward from the crowd with their gifts of money – ululations, congratulations from the deacon who compared the proceedings, applause, music and so on. This was especially so when yours truly put a hundred dollars US in the plate.

There was, however, one point in the hoopla which was particularly moving. An old man in rags stumbled forward, bent over with a load of sticks and cut branches on his back. He placed them before the improvised Lord's table. The Bishop explained to me this man had no money but gave what he had. The wood would be sold or the parish

¹ As well as our reading from Hebrews. see Romans 12:1-2 on this.

² See our OT reading for a parallel. Jesus is milking the prophetic tradition here at many levels – see footnote 6 below in this regard.

priest would use it and divert his own cash into the building fund they were establishing this day.

I am told it is common in some churches these days for there to be constant teaching about tithing. People are urged to sign up to giving targets and expected to give additionally beyond their tithe. I have to say this leaves me somewhat uncomfortable. Until now, I have told myself that I feel like this because the churches that do this sort of thing are often full of, if not the poor widow or the bent man offering his sticks, then, at least, the vulnerable, those who can least afford it, who are in some way being manipulated out of their money by used car salesmen masquerading as shepherds of the flock.³

Certainly in passages just preceding today's Gospel, Jesus didn't pull his punches in criticising the scribes⁴ for their self-serving conceit and hypocrisy, when, as guardians and teachers of the law, they use their power to exploit widows for their own benefit.⁵

Yet spending the last couple of weeks mulling over today's particular reading, I have a sense that reading Jesus' words through such a lens and projecting that onto my contemporaries will not do. Whatever the excesses of these churches, the same could have been said of the poor widow, yet Jesus evidently *approved* of her act of sacrifice,⁶ even while he was fully aware of her plight, was angry about it and directed his ministry primarily to such as her – the dispossessed of Israel.

³ See Ezekiel 34 for what God makes of this behaviour by the leaders of Israel.

⁴ Even while, as noted, earlier Mark records him dialoguing freely and even commending at least one scribe in particular.

⁵ Mark 12:35-40.

⁶ I am aware that there are other readings of Jesus' observation of the widow: that Jesus makes no commendation of the widow but, rather, he is simply pointing to her as an example of how the scribes and wealthy use their role as educated teachers and interpreters of the law (and guardians of the temple) to, in effect, steal from widows – the poorest and most vulnerable. (See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis 1988, p.320-322).

This assumes that Jesus' immediately preceding admonition of the scribes (Mk.12:38-40) is the conditioning rubric for reading our text. Such a prophetic reading would be justified of Luke's parallel account of the widow's story (Lk.21:1-4). In Mark's account, however, with Brendan Byrne (*A Costly Freedom*, a Michael Glazier book, 2008), I have taken Jesus' pause and then gathering of his disciples for instruction, as pointing to an "exemplary rather than prophetic denunciation". Either reading is possible and justified.

If, then, there is to be any reason for discomfiture over Jesus' approval of the poor widow's generous giving we have to look elsewhere.

It seems to me, the real source of ill ease has to be in the challenge found in the text itself: the widow gives in *extreme*, not just from her poverty, but from her *simple trust* of God – the very trust required from those who would love God with all their heart, understanding and strength, and love neighbour as themselves.

If there is one thing that characterises the explosion of the Church, the rebirth of Christianity in the 'Global South', as it were, it is not just full-on worship, the use of indigenous expression and so on (frankly, African culture is given to exuberant expression anyway, Christian or otherwise). No, the real hallmark of the new Christendom is *simple trust that the Jesus story is true, that the scriptures can be trusted and so everything is different.*

'Walk in the light', is the catch cry of the East African revival that still reverberates today. It is in the light of the Jesus story that everything is seen and done differently – how we regard God, ourselves, our neighbour, our world, changes completely when we step out and grasp the Gospel as truth, not just "spiritual truth" (whatever that may mean), but a reality (Truth with a capital T) to be *lived*.

I don't know about you, but I find the widow, the bent man and even – yes, shock horror – the former gang member at the new 4 Square Gospel Holy Spirit Band Wagon Church on the corner, *very challenging...* as challenging as Jesus' commitment to follow through to the cross the very week he spotted the women giving all from what God had given her...

What holds me back from their sort of love of God? What keeps me from their sort of commitment and open hearted generosity? Education maybe? Hard won experience? Responsibilities of family and extended family? Perhaps...

As I think about it, though, maybe the answer lies elsewhere... Maybe it's about faith, or, at least the kind of faith *I* have (or don't have)... and from that, it's maybe about *fear*...

It's one thing to say the creeds and even read the scriptures, study them and pray reasonably regularly, to sing God's praises and even give generously by most standards. But it's another to abandon, not just myself, but my family, to God's care.

I think I'm probably more in the camp of the Arab who said, "pray to Allah, but tie your camel". Really, at the end of the day, I'm what my father would have called a 'five bob each way' man; or, in contemporary terms, my super scheme may be ethically invested, but it's also "hedged" and diversified.

The irony is, of course, that such an apparently shrewd approach to life leaves me impoverished, since it is predicated on *fear* – fear of what will happen if I commit to something which may not perform, that may not turn out to be all I hoped it would be. Such is the scepticism of our time; a time which values freedom (and, therefore, delayed choice), above all else, yet, propelled by insecurity, enslaves itself to the limited choices of a never satisfied consumerism.

Against this rising tide, then, the real issue the poor widow puts before me is not just a challenge to tithe or give more – it is much more radical and demanding than that. Radical in that it gets to the radix – the root of the issue – and demanding because it demands *everything* from me, not just 10% plus.

Loving God with *all* that we are and have, loving neighbour as our self. This sort of faith is *beyond* belief; it has less to do with the creed than it has to do with letting go.

The Gospel principle of giving is the widow's offering, not the tithe. Her call is to faith; faith as *simple trust in God's goodness*; trust that liberates me into total dependence upon God and issues forth in sacrificial generosity.

Think what such a lived faith would mean in our society, a society which, even if it doesn't know it (to adapt Paul):

...waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed... in the hope that it will be liberated from its

bondage to decay and brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God.