

## XXIV Sunday in Trinity – 32nd Ordinary Time

The link between the First Reading and the Gospel today is that both concern widows who acted with great generosity. In biblical society generally, widows formed a particularly vulnerable class. They come first in the triad of vulnerable ones to whom the Torah summoned Israel to give particular protection: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the land.

The wider context of the First Reading (1 Kings 17) is that of universal famine in Israel during the reign of the worthless King Ahab, who did not follow the commandments of God. He and his wife Jezebel have been persecuting the true prophet of God Elijah, and he has been running for his life. He has been fed in the wilderness by the ravens and quenched his thirst in the wadi Cherith. Now, however, the wadi has dried up because of the lack of rain and he has been instructed by God to go to the Sidonian town of Zarephath, where a widow will feed him.

When Elijah approaches the widow for food, she points out the extremity of the situation for herself and her son. With the very little she has left, she is about to prepare the last supper before they die of hunger. I am pretty convinced none of us in the Church this morning will ask for help from someone who practically has nothing like this widow. It's not something we do out of common sense. **But, the difference here is Elijah is obeying God's voice.** He is obedient to God's instructions when he asks for a meal from this poor widow. At times, what God asks of us does not make human sense or logic. Do we have the courage to obey his commands even when part of us think that they don't make sense? There is a transrational aspect to faith.

Therefore, Elijah, having faith in God's command, urges her not to be afraid, and asks her to prepare a cake for himself, and then for herself and her son, and assures her that jar of meal and jug of oil will not fail until the famine is over. When the woman does so, putting her trust in the prophet's word, she finds that provision is made just as he had foretold.

At various times in our lives, we could feel that we have nothing more to give, no energy left, no resources available and motivation has disappeared from our Spirit, and that we have been running on an empty tank, we have run out of our own strength. **This is a good time to rely totally on God and his providence.** Trust in God that he could come to our aid and give us life when we least expect it.

The episode of the poor widow also illustrates a more widespread biblical pattern. People who act hospitably and generously, trusting in a divine promise in the face of evidence to the contrary, find that the Lord provides with a generosity that is overwhelming. Jesus says in Luke 6:38 *"Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men given into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured to you"* Faith is the channel through which the generosity and power of God flow into the world.

There are two rather different ways of interpreting the corresponding 'widow' scene in the Gospel (Mark 12:38-44). If we set aside the part of the text immediately preceding the description of the widow's action, that is, Jesus' condemnation of the scribes for their religious flamboyance, then the widow's action provides an extreme example of religious generosity and trust in God. As Jesus points out, it is not the amount that is contributed that counts before God but the totality of personal trust and self-giving that the amount represents. For

some, it was just what they had left over after making good allowance for their comfortable lifestyle. For the widow, it was absolutely everything: keeping nothing for herself, she could rely now only on the providence of God to whom she had surrendered all. In this way, the widow becomes an example of faith to admire and possibly to imitate according to circumstance and calling.

**The poor widow further typifies what Jesus will do himself- give everything as an offering to God.** When Jesus is finished giving, there will be nothing left for him to give. He gives his all, holding nothing back – not much self-care or self-preservation is practiced by our Lord. That is the reality of his piety.

Every Jewish male was required to pay an annual half-shekel offering towards the costs of the temple, and women were not obligated to make this offering, so the offering of the widow was not required even, but freely given. As we know, the Jerusalem temple was a massive structure with a large cohort of priests and attendants, and its upkeep must have been a very expensive exercise. As parishioners of this large church we know that it's an expensive exercise to upkeep a large building. So generosity is always called forth for the upkeep of the churches and charities.

The alternative view is to interpret what is happening here not as something to admire but in effect to deplore. In his denunciation of the scribes in the immediately preceding verses, Jesus had singled out for critique their taking the places of honour at banquets (where they will be well fed), while 'swallowing the property of widows'.

Immediately, after the scene he will speak of the destruction of the Temple to whose treasury the widow contributes all she has. This wider context suggests

that Jesus is interpreting what the widow does as an instance where religious law, as interpreted by the scribes, is inducing ‘little ones’, such as her, to contribute to the treasury far more than they can afford and, indeed, as in this instance, their total livelihood. The scene would, then, prepare the way for the prophecy about the Temple’s destruction with which Jesus’ discourse on the future (Mark 13) will commence.

In the wider understanding of the Gospel the Temple will, in any case, cease to be of significance since the function of atonement associated with it will soon be taken over once and for all by the shedding of Jesus’ blood (Mark 10:45; 14:24). The scene then becomes something of a warning against the way in which religion, falsely interpreted and promoted, can serve to oppress rather than liberate the poor and vulnerable, for whose cause and whose life Christ shed his blood on the cross.

We are not necessarily faced with a stark choice between these two interpretations. Both are valid and valuable – in some ways opposite sides of the one coin. **We can admire the widow’s generosity and faith while remaining critical of the religious and political systems that drive people to such poverty and extremes.**

Jesus hopes that his own disciples will take inspiration from the example of these poor widows, not from the scribes hungry for status and honour. He hopes that we, his followers, will be equally generous with our own resources. Those resources are not always measured in money. We are called on to give of our time, our talents, our understanding, empathy, our listening ears etc. We are asked to give not just from our abundance but from our substance. That kind of giving always hurts, because we feel all spent after it. Like the widow, we might feel that we have nothing more to give; but it’s the kind of giving that counts with Jesus.

*According to St. Ambrose, 'God does not consider what one gives but what one keeps.'* Could it be that we give too little and keep too much? If so let us pray for generosity of heart at today's Eucharist. Or on the other hand, do we feel we are exploited by an unjust political and social system? Then let us ask for courage to speak and fight to eradicate injustices from our world.