

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

1 Kings 17:10-16

Ps 145

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

When we read the Scriptures we have a natural inclination to look for the moral of the story. And this makes sense, since we have all these marvellous parables and short historical anecdotes that have no doubt been handed down to us for a purpose.

So for instance, when we look at today's Gospel, the moral seems obvious enough – namely, that the poor widow's small contribution to the temple treasury is far more meaningful than the overflowing contributions of the rich. As such, we generally read this as a kind of exhortation calling on us to be equally generous – and this indeed is a worthwhile lesson that can be drawn from the reading.

And yet, while this surface interpretation is indeed valid, if we place this little episode in the context of what precedes it in Mark's Gospel, we can see lessons in this story of the poor widow that are even more profound than what we see at first glance.

Just one chapter earlier, Jesus entered Jerusalem and dramatically cleansed the temple by turning upside-down the tables that belonged to the buyers and sellers. (*By the way, please don't take that as encouragement to do the same thing with our bric-a-brac tables at the back of the church!*) And while we are prone to read Jesus' turning of the tables as a way of restoring the building as a house of prayer, what Jesus' actions actually did was shut the temple down. If there is no trade, then there are no sacrifices. No sacrifice means no offering to God. The temple was the centre of religious and political life, and Jesus was effectively condemning it for having become corrupt to the core.

Then, just a few verses later, Jesus affirmed the scribe who said that loving God and neighbour was worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. Again, Jesus was essentially declaring that, from now on, the temple would no longer be the great meeting place between God and man – it would no longer be the central point of intersection between heaven and earth.

Now, the people could tell that this is what Jesus was getting at—and they knew how dangerous it could be to undermine the temple authorities—which is why we are told that after this no-one dared to ask Jesus any more questions.

So it is in this context that today's Gospel is situated. And so, if we return to the story, we see that the poor widow is not just a model of generosity, but also a double victim of the temple's corruption. She supports with her last two coins the very people who have impoverished her. In effect, she pours out her life for a corrupt—

and soon-to-be defunct—organisation. It's really quite a heartbreaking scene – one which has no immediate resolution.

Ultimately, this episode needs to be seen in the light of what would happen a few days later – when Jesus would mount the wood of the cross, and in so doing let himself become the *definitive* sacrifice, and the ultimate mediator between God and man. On the cross, Jesus is the ultimate High Priest – becoming in the flesh what the temple had only foreshadowed. And against this backdrop, the poor widow from today's Gospel becomes a foreshadowing herself of the common priesthood that all believers inherit at their baptism.

Now remember, the defining act of a priest is to offer sacrifice. Jesus, the true High Priest, offered the perfect sacrifice on Calvary, and the ordained priests of the Church act in the person of Christ when we re-enact this mystery in the Eucharist. And yet *all* Christians are baptised into the common priesthood of the faithful, and such we are all called by Christ to offer sacrifice in our own lives.

The poor widow foreshadows this mystery, because her offering in the temple was a *true* sacrifice – not just an offering of her leftover money. Though the rich gave far more in a numerical sense, their gift represented little-to-no sacrifice for them. In contrast, the poor widow gave all that she had to live on, and hence gave her *very self* as an offering to the Lord.

It was not so much the giving of money, as the total gift of self, that Jesus commended to his disciples, and which we are called to imitate. In our baptism we have become “living stones” of the new Temple, and we exercise our common priesthood each time that we make meaningful sacrifices in our lives for the sake of the Lord and our neighbour. This is not just about money, but also when we do things like sacrificing our will to that of the Lord; or sacrificing our right to hold grudges against others; or sacrificing our time for our children, or the sick person next door.

And be sure of this – in Christ, this total gift of self is not the act of a slave, but the free offering of a son or daughter. In Christ, the emptying out of ourselves does not leave us impoverished, but enriched. For ultimately, the offering of our lives in God's service—in whatever walk of life we find ourselves in—serves not only the good of others, but redounds to our own spiritual benefit as well.

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Now, while God is calling us to offer our whole lives to him and our neighbour, it nonetheless remains true that one area in which we can do this is with our financial resources. And so at this point, I'll ask you to listen to a brief message from our Archbishop, who is inviting us to join with him in assisting the neediest among us this Christmas: <https://youtu.be/7VUtSLuq7iA>