



32nd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

In the name of the Father +, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's readings have told us the stories of two widows: the first was the widow who Elijah asked to provide him with bread and water; the second was the widow whom Jesus watched putting her famous 'mite' into the treasury. These two women were from different times and circumstances, but they had one thing in common: they were poor. The widow whom Elijah encountered had only enough grain and oil with which to make a final meal for herself and her son; the widow whom Jesus observed only had the ability and wealth to put two small coins into the Temple treasury. Neither of these women, even in their own time, could be described as anything other than poor, and yet they make their ways into the pages of Scripture. Why were these widows so poor? Obviously, with their husbands dead, they had no way of earning money: there was no social security or insurance policies in those days. Even though the Law taught people to care for widows, a widow would have to rely on the generosity of her wider family and the charity of others. Though the Jewish Law taught that its adherents should have a respect and a care for the widow and the poor, it is not for this reason that we hear the stories of these two women: it was not their lack of wealth or provisions that mattered, or should concern us, but rather, what they did with the little they had.

Let's take the Elijah's encounter first: the widow in this story was so poor, and had so little food, that she had convinced herself that she and her son were going to die. She must have been absolutely desperate to have realised that her situation was so dire. It seems, then, almost cruel of Elijah to ask to share in that last meal, taking away some food from that woman and her son. But, this didn't provoke insults from the widow or tears or an argument: rather, she takes Elijah at his word, and is not afraid to share and be generous with the last morsels of what she has. And this is what saved her: the wheat and the oil did not run out because of her willingness to be generous, to put another's need before her own.

In the story we hear from S. Mark's Gospel, the widow whom Jesus watches putting her small amount of money into the Temple treasury is only observed: she isn't asked to do anything, like the woman in the first story; she is merely watched, obeying the Law, by contributing what she is able to the Temple funds. In some ways, there is nothing remarkable about her story: she was only doing what the Law prescribed. And yet, Jesus finds something in this woman's behaviour noteworthy: 'I tell you solemnly, this poor widow has put in more than all who have contributed to the treasury; for they have all put in money they had over, but she from the little she had has put in everything she possessed, and all she had to live on.' In order to fulfil the Law, this woman didn't hold anything back, when she could have done, and might have been tempted to do. In order to obey the commandments of God, she gives the last pennies that she has to live on, entrusting herself to God's keeping and; allowing herself to be cared for by his providence alone.

Both of these women have a great deal to teach us: the first widow was an exemplary model of generosity; the second, an example of trust, and a true reliance upon God's providence and care. Both of these women had next to nothing, and yet, from the little they had, they were able to serve God and their neighbour, and do so more perfectly than those who had much more, and whose keeping of the

Law was done so from the abundance of their wealth. Both of these women took a risk: by giving away their last meal or their last coppers, they could very well have died; but it was through these sacrificial acts that they were saved. The people Jesus watched giving money to the Temple from what they had left over made no sacrifice in obeying the Law, and this is what he is railing against: they might have been keeping the Law to the letter, but they were certainly not keeping its spirit.

How much of that is true in our lives? What are the sacrifices that we make in service of God and neighbour? Do we make any at all? It's very easy for all of us to settle into a comfortable pattern of coming to church week by week, putting the same amount of money on the plate and going home again. Perhaps we give to charities or appeals, as we should, but how deeply does our concern for the poor, the needy and the Church touch our hearts, and, more importantly our wallets? And, of course, it's by no means all about money, though it is most often when the money is tight that we learn where our priorities really lie. What about our talents, given to us by God, to be used in his service and that of one another? Do we use them at all, or keep them to ourselves? These are difficult and penetrating questions that all of us need to ponder, if we are to learn the true meaning of discipleship. Sacrifice is an integral part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, in imitation of the ultimate sacrifice that he paid for our salvation. None of us are as poor as either of the widows in today's stories: none of us has only one last meal in our cupboards; none of us has only two pence to put in the plate: but there are those in our world who are in that situation, and we should always be mindful of them, and thankful to our heavenly Father for the blessings of wealth, food and shelter that we enjoy.

We have in these two widows examples of generosity, selflessness and trust. These are virtues that all Christians, including you and me, are called to exhibit in our lives. How generous are we, with our money, time and talents? How selfless? Are we really willing to sacrifice money, time and talents for the service of God and the building up of his kingdom, or would we prefer to remain comfortable on the fringes, not wishing to get our hands dirty and make any sacrifice that impinges on our comfortable and complacent way of life? And what about trust? Do we really put all our hope and trust in God's providence alone, or do we prefer to trust our money and our possessions to get us through? Are we those sorts of people for whom money does the talking?

Today's stories about the two poor widows have much to teach us about what true obedience to Christ is about, and what discipleship involves. The way of the Christian disciple is a way of sacrifice, and all of us are called to make sacrifices, large and small, in the service of God and neighbour. This might not always involve money, but demands are placed on every area of our life, if we are truly going to follow our Lord as he calls us to do. This, unfortunately, is not going to make us comfortable; nor should it, for if we were comfortable, we would have made no sacrifice.

It was the generosity, selflessness and trust in God that proved that those widows were true servants of God and neighbour, and it was their generosity, selflessness and trust that saved them. It was, too, the generosity, selflessness and trust in God of our Lord Jesus, which caused him to sacrifice his life for us sinful men and women; that free gift, which won us salvation. This is the example that we are called to imitate and put into practice in our own lives if we want to be Christ's disciples. It's not an abstract concept for the true Christian: it must become a practical reality, and if we are called to make ourselves uncomfortable for Christ's sake and the sake of others, then so be it. Christ who was rich for our sake became poor: we might not be called upon to give up our last meal or last penny for others, but we are certainly called to serve those who are poor, needy and less fortunate than ourselves; we are certainly called by Christ out of our complacency and comfort zones in order to be better disciples, and servants of God and one another. The real question is: will we actually do it?

Amen.