

Sunday 32

If we wanted to give this Sunday a particular name, we could call it the Sunday of widows, for both the first reading from the First Book of Kings and the Gospel from Mark speak of widows. The first reading seems pretty clear. The widow, relying on the word of the prophet Elijah, is willing to bake a little cake for him before she feeds her son and herself from the very little remaining flour and oil she has left. After that, she believes, her son and she will die, for there will be nothing left to eat. But God rewards her faith in the prophet's word. Her jar of flour and her jug of oil lasted for a whole year until, we suppose, the rains came and there was food again in the land.

The Gospel story also seems clear. Jesus observes a poor widow who puts all of her livelihood, all she has, into the temple's collection box. Rich people also put their offerings in. But Jesus now tells his disciples that the poor woman had given more than all of them because she had given everything she had while the rich had given just a part of their wealth. That is all that is said in the text, but we add to it in our minds. We presume that this widow, like the widow in the first reading, will be rewarded by God for her generosity, that God will support her because she has trusted so

completely in him as to give him everything she has. So she becomes a model of faith for us. She teaches us how to live: to trust in God's protection of us: "Cast all your cares upon the Lord, because he cares for you," we read in 1 Peter 5:7. That is a lesson we have to learn again and again. We want to be independent of God in a bad sense. We try to go it alone. "I can take care of myself," we say to ourselves. And then we find that we cannot do that, and we have to be brought back kicking and screaming to God. We have to learn to put in that last penny and trust in him. "None of you can be my disciple if he or she does not renounce all his possessions," Jesus tells us. We have to learn that. "Give me that last penny," we can imagine Jesus saying to us. "Trust in me, not in your possessions, whatever they may be."

But some commentators offer a very different understanding of this Gospel widow. She is not a person to be praised for her generosity; instead she is someone for whom we should feel sorry, for she has been exploited by the religious leaders of her day. How do they come up with such an interpretation? They do so paying attention to the context of this story. If you look again at the Gospel in your missal, you will see that Jesus here says: "Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues, and

places of honor at banquets. They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation.” Then comes our little story. So is this widow one of these widows. Has she been exploited by the religious leaders of her day? Have they told her: “Give me your money and we will say a prayer for you.” Notice now that Jesus does not praise the widow. We added that in ourselves. He simply observes what has happened. And then we ask ourselves: Would we tell anyone to do what she has done? Some of us would say no. Others of us, going back to the case of the widow and the prophet, would say yes. So how are we to read this little story? Is this a story about great faith or about great exploitation?

Our church has always had problems with money. It was the sale of indulgences which set Luther off on his reformation. And then we have the recent scandals of the church’s money being used to pay off the victims of priestly sexual abuse. This is a mixed bag. Many times the church has been sued and must even go into bankruptcy to pay these victims. But at least in some cases we can question the intentions of greedy lawyers and victims who simply want money and revenge.

Yes, it is interesting to reflect on this gospel. Was Jesus looking with a loving smile at this woman who had such great faith that she put her last penny into the box, or was he crying that here was a woman who was being exploited by the religious leaders of her day? Whatever may be the case, this much is clear: We must use our wealth, our possessions, in such a way that they help us to God and do not lead us away from him. And we might also keep an eye on ourselves as the church, as the community of faith, that we as a community do the same.