

BIBLE READINGS: Psalm 127 Mark 12:38-44

SERMON

Widows in Biblical times were generally vulnerable and poor as they could not own property in their own right. They were vulnerable in a culture where men held the power and control and owned everything including their women. How unfair that women were treated as second-class citizens. Why did God set us up for such misery? Now things have changed in our society but women in our country are part of the privileged few who have won equal rights in most areas, but much of this ground has been won in our lifetime, and only in certain countries. Millions of women still suffer under dominating and controlling societies where men have all the power.

And the control can exist in more subtle ways and can still be just as dangerous for some women who do have choices but just don't know it, even in our own "liberated culture". Even today women accept without question the idea that the Bible teaches that women are to submit to male authority both in the home and church. This is considered by many women as God's will for them.

In Mark's reading Jesus took a position facing the twelve large public treasury boxes with their horn shaped receptacles - a shape that emphasised the sound of the coins as they rolled their way down into the coffers chests and where the donor had to declare the amount. It was a very public affair and loaded with class distinctions and a not so hidden manipulation to give generously. Mark is clearly suggesting that Jesus is sitting in judgement and scrutinising the affairs of the temple treasury. Jesus calls his disciples over and tells them, "Many rich men put in from their abundance: one poor widow put in two little coins. They all gave from their affluence...she in her destitution gave everything she had- her whole life." Jesus is both angry that the temple has robbed this woman of her very means of livelihood and touched deeply by her generous vulnerability. He condemns the value system that motivates her action and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it.

This comes at the end of a series of confrontations and debates between Jesus and the three powerful groups that controlled the temple culture and therefore the people - namely the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Furthermore the debates all took place within the hallowed grounds of the temple itself. Just before the widows offering, Jesus had publicly warned all those listening including the Scribes to "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the market places etc... They devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive greater condemnation." The background to this was that culturally women could not be entrusted to manage their deceased husbands' affairs so the scribes became the trustees of the estates of widows. They earned this legal right to administrate the estates because of their public reputation for piety and trustworthiness. As compensation they would usually get a percentage of the assets; but the practice was open to abuse.

Imagine how Jesus' statements must have driven the Scribes into a rage for revenge. Jesus and the widow had much in common. They were both prepared to give their all. Jesus held nothing back in his attempt to expose religious power as nothing more than a pitiful quest of empty, self-righteous fearful men. Their greatest fears were to be vulnerable and to love like God. They were disconnected from their own spiritual lives and invested everything in their quest for privilege and power. Jesus distanced himself together with his Father as far from them as he could, to proclaim that God is not like this. The temple had to go. At this point Jesus exits the temple for the final time, as in disgust.

Now our Psalm for today was written about 1000 years before Jesus and began with the words

"If the Lord does not build the house,

the work of the builders is useless "

Psalm 127 is titled "A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon" "Ascents" may indicate that this psalm was sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem. Solomon was the builder of the Temple. It can read like this "Unless the Lord builds the temple, those who build it labour in vain." Referring to the temple built by Solomon nearly a thousand years before and had since been destroyed. Now the one Jesus exited from was the rebuilt grand opulent version by Herod from oppressive taxes from the people. The first temple had failed dismally and so had the second. Jesus declares as he walks out, that this one too would soon be in ruins. In AD 70 forty years later after his death it was razed to the ground and all that remains of it to this day is the Wailing Wall. The Temple "builders" had lost their way and had laboured in vain. Their lives would match the temple ruins scattered and plundered.

"Christ didn't mess around with replicas and enactments. He went into the real Holy Place - not our home made model, but heaven itself - and there he is now, in the presence of God, appearing on our behalf. It is not that Jesus has to offer himself to God over and over again. The old high priest had to go into the Holy Place in the temple again every year to offer a sacrifice of blood - not his own, but that of an animal. If Jesus had been required to follow the same system, he would have needed to come back and suffer on earth over and over again, from the day of creation to the end of time. It is not like that though. Jesus waited until time was almost up and then appeared once and for all. He came to remove sin, permanently, and he made the ultimate sacrifice to see the job through.

Everyone has to die once - that's just part of being human - and after that comes judgement on our lives. Christ died once too - he absorbed into himself all the guilt and grief of the whole dysfunctional human race and sacrificed his own life to save them from it. Having done that once, he will appear again, but not to do the same thing all over again. This time he will appear for the grand finale - the great liberation of all those who have been eagerly anticipating his promised arrival."

This is not a story about boundless generosity and self-sacrifice. Rather it is tragic evidence of the religious exploitation for which Jesus condemned the Temple religious establishment. Do not see this story as a model to encourage generosity to organised religion, but rather as a condemnation of the use of religion to exploit simple, suffering and powerless humanity. Jesus is teaching in the Temple. He has just condemned the unscrupulous scribes who devour widows' property under the excuse of religious fervour. Then he looks up and sees this widow putting "everything she had, her whole living" into the treasury and he points to her and says, "See what I mean?" The scribes never literally robbed widows' houses. But by their teaching they exploited widows by persuading them in their privation to give up even the very little they had.

Jesus commends the exploited widow. Why? Does Jesus approve of the process that has reduced her to the state of poverty? No. Jesus praises her for her sincere and total trust in God, not for the sorry fact that the religious establishment was taking advantage of it. In the final analysis, in the kingdom of God, it is always the victim who gets the better deal.

In the male-dominated society of New Testament Palestine, the widow symbolised all who had no voice, no means and no power. Who would such people be today? Do we as individuals and as a church reach out to such people to help them improve their lot. Or do we only tell them to pray harder and everything would be all right, knowing quite well that it takes more than prayer to revive their fortunes? Is Christianity a powerless gospel that maintains the status-quo or is it the good news that liberates and transforms personal and social life? We know the answer in theory. Let us show it in practice.