

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield

8th of November, 2009

Mark 12:38-44

Have you ever heard a sermon about the “widow’s mite” and her generosity as a giver? If you are well-off enough to give “large sums” as donations and offerings, have you been warned not to despise the “two small copper coins” given by those who are poorer? If you’re poor, have you been reassured that your “two small copper coins” are just as, if not more, valuable than the large sums given by the wealthy out of their abundance? Have you heard this story as an encouragement to be a generous, even sacrificial giver?

A lot of commentators read the text this way, and see Jesus’ comment on the difference in the gifts of the rich people and the poor widow as praise of the widow who gives all she has to live on to the Temple treasury. Some of them say that she’s meant to be an example to the disciples; Jesus calls to his disciples to comment on her giving. Others say that she’s a fore-runner of Jesus, who is about to give everything he has in the crucifixion, saving the world and reconciling God and humanity through the despised gift of a criminal’s death. But there’s a minority of commentators who read this story very differently, and I’m going to go along with them. I don’t think that this story is about the importance of generous giving, or the relative values of the gifts of the rich and the poor. And I definitely don’t think that Jesus was pointing out the poor widow to his disciples, or to us, as an example to be followed. I think this story is a warning about the ways that religion can go wrong; a warning against using religion to abuse or mistreat the poor.

Immediately before the story of the offering of the poor widow, Jesus tells the large crowd gathered around him in the temple to “beware of the scribes”. The scribes are those learned in the Torah, the Law of Moses, the religious experts. They are the people who understand and interpret God’s law for the people. This is a difficult passage for anyone to preach on, because anyone standing up to preach is in exactly the same position as the scribes – interpreting God’s word for the people. This might be why so many commentators are quick to point out that the scribes aren’t universally condemned. A few passages before today’s reading Jesus praised one of the scribes for answering questions about the greatest commandments wisely, and said to him: “You are not far from the kingdom of God”.¹ It’s not the role of the scribes in interpreting the law that Jesus condemns, but the way they carry out that role: demanding honour and reverence from the rest of the population; acting hypocritically in saying long prayers; and, very importantly, “devouring widow’s houses”! We aren’t told how they devour widow’s houses. Maybe they use undue influence to convince the widows to let them manage their property. Or it could be that they use fine-sounding religious language to encourage the widows to give all they have to the Temple, the place of prayer. If the second suggestion is the case, when Jesus comments that the widow “out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on,” rather than praising the widow he’s showing an immediate example of the religious institution taking away a poor widow’s last penny.

Imagine if this was not a story in the Bible. Imagine if in real life we saw a poor widow giving the very last of her money to religion. My immediate response would be that any group that demanded it would be less of a religion and more of a cult. I think that if any of us read, heard or saw a news story about anyone, rich or poor, giving everything they had to a church we would be appalled. So why should we imagine that Jesus would be any different? Of course, we know that Jesus encouraged extravagant acts that made no financial sense, like the gift of the woman who anointed him with precious perfume. But we also know that he came bringing life in abundance and preaching good news to the poor.

¹ Mark 12:34.

It's interesting that there's no invitation in this story for the disciples or us to imitate the widow. There's no statement that Jesus looked on her and loved her; no command to go and do likewise; no remark that she's not far from the kingdom. It's possible that we are meant to read the invitation to follow her into the story, but nothing like that is stated. Jesus simply says that the widow with her two small coins gave more than the rich with their large sums, and he gives his reason for making that statement.

The widow's religious thinking, her belief that it's good and right for her to give all she has to the Temple treasury, has accomplished the very thing that Jesus just accused the scribes of doing. She now has nothing to live on; her house has been devoured. If Jesus is opposed to the devouring of widows' houses, how could he possibly be pleased with what he sees here?

If we read the story *this* way, then Jesus' attitude to the widow's gift is disapproval rather than admiration. The story isn't about the difference between arrogant scribes and poor widows, or about the relative value of the gifts of the rich and the poor. Instead, it's an example of the ways that the official religion of the time was oppressing the poorest members of society. Jesus' saying is a lament: "You might not have noticed, but that gift is a tragedy – that woman has just given away her whole living." The widow has been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to donate as she does, and Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and condemns the people who conditioned her to do it.

Commentators who argue that Jesus is praising the widow often link the widow's gift with Jesus' gift of his life. We're very near the end of the gospel of Mark, only one teaching and one chapter away from the story of Jesus' betrayal. But that one chapter and one teaching includes a discussion between Jesus and his disciples about the Temple. One of the disciples says of the Temple: "Look teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" And Jesus says to him: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." What does this mean for the gift of the widow to the Temple treasury? It was misguided, thanks to the encouragement of official religion, but the final irony of it all was that it was also a waste.

Jesus came to bring good news to the poor. He replaced a religious system that had grown oppressive and damaging, fixated on issues of cleanliness and on questions of who was in and who was out. He reminded people that the greatest two commandments are love of God and love of neighbour. In the light of Jesus' mission and message, the widow is not pointed out to the disciples as a virtuous example to be imitated. The widow, as a representative of the marginalized and powerless, is pointed out as a reminder that the church is not to take *from* the poor but to provide *for* them.

What does this mean for us, today? It partly depends on whether we see ourselves as among the rich people or as in the same situation as the poor widow. If we are able to give large sums out of our abundance, then we should by all means do so! We make offerings from what we have to God every week in church as recognition that everything we have comes from God and is to be shared. But if we're in the situation of the poor widow, struggling to live, then this story is not meant to encourage us to give the little that we have. Everything we have comes from God and is to be shared, and for some that sharing is to be done by receiving rather than giving. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, not to place more burdens. And he came to bring good news to the rich, who are invited to join with God and imitate God in giving from abundance. This story of the "widow's mite" has an important lesson for us. But that lesson is not necessarily the one that we've been used to hearing.