

Pentecost 23 (B)

November 12, 2006: Wesley 9.00 & 10.30am

Rev Peter Walker

**Ruth 3. 1-5 & 4. 13-17 and Mark 12. 38-44**

When I was a university chaplain in Sydney,  
I had no formal Sunday commitments to a congregation anywhere  
and so I tended to be asked to help different churches, here and there,  
which didn't have a Minister of their own.

At one stage I found myself preaching each Sunday for full year  
to an evening congregation of mainly university students  
near the centre of Sydney.

I enjoyed it very much, for several reasons,  
among them being the fact that my task was simply to preach;  
and there were others who selected the songs and hymns,  
wrote the prayers, and led the worship.  
I could come along on Sunday nights  
and just receive what the students had to offer.  
It was always a very meaningful experience.

I didn't always go to plan, of course.  
I remember a night when Ian, who was not a student  
but a guy they had made very welcome nonetheless-  
an older man, who we knew had an illness of some sort -  
was rostered to offer the intercessory prayers.  
Instead of praying, Ian talked for just over 30 minutes about trains.  
Perhaps remembering late in the piece what he was there to do  
Ian did end the time with a brief prayer for all trains,  
thanking them for their service to the community,  
and concluding with a closing petition  
on behalf of Thomas the Tank Engine.  
That was unexpected.  
Yet everyone listened as patiently as we could

because we knew that Ian had been very pleased to be able to make a contribution; it had meant a great deal to him.

Mostly, the worship was wonderfully creative.

You can probably imagine what thoughtful university students can do if you give them a free hand to prepare their own worship services.

Another evening at that congregation came to mind when I looked at today's Gospel passage.

We were seated before the service, about 50 or 60 people, listening, as always, to piano music – a kind of introit – when just at the moment we would have expected worship to begin the lights went out so that the church was completely dark. Then the text of the Gospel reading, the same one we have had this morning about the hypocrisy of the scribes and the generosity of the widow, was cast up on the screen, just for a moment.

It was just long enough to briefly scan the whole.

But then quite quickly, the text itself went fully black except for one sentence, which was bright and clear:

“...but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had”.

Nothing was said.

Nothing needed to be said.

And we sat in silence for a few minutes with those words before us,

“...but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had”.

Whatever was their intended effect,

it was enough for me to remember it as clear as crystal 7 years later.

And I don't think for anyone there was the *money* at all central –

it was the devotedness, the devotion, the holiness in service and sacrifice of the woman who – I imagine anyway – as being stooped and gentle in appearance, tough hands and tired eyes.

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The story is poignantly brief.

An Israelite widow puts her last two copper coins  
into the Temple's treasury,  
after those who have gone before her have put in  
much more impressive amounts,  
but amounts that were convenient for them.

What sort of life did this widow live in biblical days?

What sort of symbol might this widow be for you and me today?

First then, the widow.

We tend to focus on what the widow did;  
but to grasp *how much she gave*,  
we have to understand who the widow was.

She was dependent, she had to dress in a special way,  
she could not inherit from her husband.

If she had no children she returned to her father's house.

If she had no father and no man to defend her rights  
she was an obvious victim for a predator,  
and felt at the mercy of dishonest judges.

Yes, God's law did declare that you shall not abuse any widow or orphan.

Yes, and Moses did proclaim:

cursed be anyone who deprives the widow of justice.

Yet, in practice, these laws were a lifeless ideal for the most part  
and hardly improved the lives of those  
who were without family of their own.

How much the prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah –  
pleaded for the better care of the widows and the poor  
is a sign in itself of the shamefully hard times a widow had.

So oppressed were they that Malachi decided to make  
Yahweh himself the protector of widows.

If we cast our thoughts back for a moment  
 we may still remember Naomi in the book of Ruth, from last week.  
 She had lost not only her husband, but her two sons.  
 Too old, it would seem, to have a husband  
 and without a father still living,  
 she must have found life very hard to take.

So, in a part of the story we didn't touch on last week,  
 when she returned to Bethlehem and the women of Bethlehem asked:  
 "Is this Naomi?"  
 Her reply said a great deal about the widow's plight:  
 "Call me no longer Naomi, [for] that is pleasant;  
 call me Mara, [for] that [means] bitter. For the Lord has dealt bitterly with me. "

So now we have some picture of the widow of Mark's gospel.  
 We do not know as much about her as we do about Naomi,  
 but knowing she was a widow is enough to know her circumstances.  
 And from all that we have already said,  
 we do not need to be persuaded that she is poor.  
 When she drops into the treasury two small coins,  
 a few cents, Jesus says:  
 "She, out of her poverty has put in everything she had."

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So what does this story mean for us today?

I can certainly tell you what Mark wants you to notice.  
 He wants you to notice *not only* the Widow's devotion  
 and then go out genuinely to emulate it.  
 He wants you to notice *not only* the Scribes –  
 who are the parading religious types,  
 who make it clear by the way they speak to people,

and the way they pray in public,  
 and the seats they expect at special functions –  
 that *they* are God’s Holy people...  
 and Mark wants you to make sure you never become like that.  
 He wants you to notice that they are self-deceived  
 and the *truly Godly* person here is not the Scribe but the Widow.  
 Mark certainly wants you to notice these things.

But more than either the Scribe or the Widow,  
 I think he wants you to notice the One who notices them.  
 Sitting in the Temple treasury on the eve of the final week of his life,  
 Jesus notices this woman’s devotion.

The One about whom Paul wrote in Second Corinthians:  
 though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor (2 Cor 8.9).

The One of whom it could also be said,  
*he* out of his poverty put in everything that *he* had.

Mark would want you to learn from the Widow  
 but above all - and most certainly of all -  
 he would want you to notice the one who  
 “sat down opposite the Temple treasury and watched the crowd”.

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Mother Theresa – “It’s not whether we do great things in life;  
 it’s whether we do small things with great love”.

We don’t all need to give away everything that we have in our pockets.  
 But Jesus, and Mark the gospel writer,  
 found something inspiring in the actions of the Widow that day.

To close, could I invite you to spend just one minute in quietness,  
 before we sing the hymn,  
 picturing the scene in your mind, reflecting on her devotion,  
 and on our own commitments.