

Pentecost 24 - Parish Service – 8th November 2015

Theme: “Recognizing the cost of the gift”

Readings: Mark 12: 41-44 & Ruth 3:1-5 & 4:13-17

Text: “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.....she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.” Mark 12:43b-44

Introduction

I love it when a plan comes together! I think it is part of my mild OCD that I like things orderly, planned, logical and I have everything organised. Life is much easier like that, for me. However my life rarely seems to operate that way, which frustrates me no end. In fact ministry rarely seems to be like that. You think you have everything organised and suddenly it all changes for whatever reason. Usually some-one changes their mind over something or some-one is sick or some-one gets a better offer and can't do what you've asked. All valid, but hugely frustrating. Well that's my life! However, today we have set readings that seem to be made for the occasion. Readings about widows that are incredible witnesses in the way they give. One, out of her poverty, gives to God beyond, in a sense, what she should! Another widow, initially gives her life over to being with her widowed mother-in-law, leaving her country and her kins-people, to offer her continuing support. Into both these situations we see the grace of God beautifully at work. One writer has suggested that through these women we see different faces of God or different aspects of God.

Let us take a few moments to visit the scenarios of these women presented through scripture for us today and see what they have to say to us as we gather for worship, reflection and our Parish Finance Meeting that follows the service.

Mark 12:41-44 'The widow's offering'

As Jesus moves towards his cross, and controversy swirls around him, he pauses to watch the crowd putting in their offerings. He is in the Temple but in a section known as the 'court of women' where both men and women were allowed to be. In this area there were 13 metal, trumpet shaped receptacles to place your money into. If you threw large amounts of coinage into them it would make a lot of noise and draw attention to yourself as having given lots of money. What a great way to 'show off' your wealth and what flowed from that was your power and seeking the self-esteem of others towards you. In the crowd they would hear you putting in all your coins of silver and gold and would stop and admire you as a great giver. Jesus has just got stuck into the teachers of the Law who sought the seats of honour both in the synagogues as well as at banquets. Also there is reference to "devouring widows' houses" and being showy with the robes they wear and the long prayers they make. The reference to devouring the homes of widows was about the abuse, or taking advantage for self-gain, the assets of the widows who still had material wealth even though husbands had died. Pressure was exerted on them to give to the individual teachers of the Law and this was exploited by some.

However Jesus notes the magnitude of the widow who gives two small copper coins, worth little in worldly terms, but is a huge amount for this woman to give. Out of her poverty she gives sacrificially, to the point of it costing her dearly.

Carole Newsome and Sharon Ringer from "*The Women's Bible Commentary*" on this passage write:

“For one whose only protection from complete destitution is the little money she possesses, to give all of it to the temple is to consign herself to disaster; yet this she does

without fanfare or desire for glory, but out of faith. Such indifference to conventional human desires for security, wealth, and status stand as an appropriate introduction to Jesus' teaching on the coming end of the world, for at that time faith in God and not faith in human wealth and status will establish one's membership in the saved elect of the coming kingdom."

Here Jesus draws our attention to one whom we may otherwise overlook. In looking at this poor widow and her extravagant gift, out of her poverty, we might better see God at work. We may also better understand what is about to happen to Jesus who gives all on the cross. Stewardship takes on a new complexion as we look at this the story of the widow's giving alongside the story of God's gift of Jesus.

Ruth 3:1-5 & 4:13-17 "Ruth's sacrificial love"

Last week and this, we have read snippets of the story of Ruth. Ruth, a pagan woman of Moab, had got herself involved in what we might call a 'mixed marriage' with a Jew. He was the son of Naomi and Elimelech, a Jewish family who had gone to Moab to live in a time of famine in Judah. First Naomi's husband died and then Ruth's. Both were widows. Naomi decided to return to Judah, her homeland, and loyal Ruth would not let her go alone. She travelled with Naomi to the foreign land, to the region of Bethlehem, where alien Moabites were scorned and hated. There in deep poverty they eked out an existence. At the time of the barley harvest, widow Ruth followed the reapers, gleaning the stray ears of barley missed by the reapers. The Bible reveals a God who is on the side of the desperately poor, widows and outsiders like Ruth. Unless there was an extended family their plight was grave as they were at the mercy of the powerful, male dominated society. In the Hebrew Scriptures, again and again God called his people to look after the orphans and the widows.

The amazingness of Ruth is her faithfulness and love to and of Naomi. Her care and compassion showed no bounds, forgoing all for her foreign mother-in-law.

In a sense a parable of the love of God for all people, which sees her give birth to Obed, a child to Boaz, her second Jewish husband, that is of the lineage of David and through to Jesus.

Conclusion

Here we have two women who show aspects of God to us through their generosity in poverty and generosity of love to a foreigner.

Both accounts also call upon us to look afresh at how we deal with what God has given to us. Our stewardship of time, talents, love and money all need to be considered. Through these stories from both the Hebrew and New Testament we are challenged to look at our relationships with others and our attitudes to giving to God.

Both women are role models in faith and generosity taken to an extent which we can barely comprehend.

Their stories call into the forefront of our thinking as to what are our own attitudes to money, status, positions of power and what is God asking of us today as we seek to cope with the challenges of refugees, those sleeping rough on the fringes of our community, those seeking shelter from domestic violence and having no-one to voice their concerns. Here in these stories we still have questions for our society today and for ourselves as we seek to make a difference, in the name of Christ, in a world hugely divided both in faith and wealth.

It is into this that in a few weeks' time we seek afresh the call of Advent, "Come, Lord Jesus come."

But for today we see aspects of the face of God in these women of generosity and faithfulness. May these be God given traits of ours as we follow Jesus faithfully both individually and as a community. Amen.