Homily for 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2024

By Dom Steele Hartmann ocso

'Then Jesus sat down near the offering box, watching all the people dropping in their coins.' (Mark 12:41) This Gospel passage is often used to encourage people to be generous in their support of the Church's good works. Here Jesus contrasts the support given by the well-off and that given by those not so well-off: "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given a larger offering than any of the wealthy. For the rich only gave out of their surplus, but she sacrificed out of her poverty and gave to God all that she had to live on, which was everything she had." (Mark 12:43-44) Well, human nature hasn't changed. These days, here in this country as elsewhere, relative to their resources, lower income people are the more generous. This Gospel still has something to offer us about generosity and almsgiving, if we are willing to listen.

However, that is not where my interest lies in this Gospel. Jesus tells us that this poor widow, 'out of her poverty, gave to God all that she had to live on, which was everything she had.' This reminded me of a story a little earlier in this Gospel, of a conversation Jesus had with a rich man. (Mark 10:17-23) The man came to Jesus asking, "Good Teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus tells him to keep the Commandments, and to which he replies, "Teacher, I have carefully obeyed these laws since my youth." Jesus is greatly impressed by this fellow. So, he looks at him with love and says to him, "Yet there is still one thing lacking in you. Go, sell all that you have and give the money to the poor. Then all of your treasure will be in heaven. After you've done this, come back and follow me." We are told: 'His face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.' Unlike the poor widow of our Gospel, he was unable or unwilling 'to give to God everything he possessed, all he had to live on.' This prompted Jesus to say to his disciples, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God!" (C.f.: Mark 4:19; Luke 16:13) I'm sure, if Jesus had spoken to the poor widow, he would have said to her … as he did to *a scribe* who genuinely sought to know from him 'Which is the first of all the Commandments?': "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." (Mark 12:34) (Jesus' comments in today's Gospel are not meant as a blanket put down of all scribes, the men of his day who were learned in the Law and whom the *Talmud* taught the ordinary faithful to revere because of their knowledge of God's Law.) For those willing to see it, today's Gospel can shed some light on entry into this 'Kingdom of God that is at hand.' (Mark 1:15)

The woman in today's Gospel 'gave to God all that she had to live on, which was everything she had.' In pointing her out to his disciples, Jesus does not mean to eulogise Poverty. For, as with everyone else, poor people also can and do behave badly (c.f.: Mark 12:38-41); Poverty is no ticket to 'eternal life' in the 'Kingdom of God.' (Mark 10:17, 23) In today's Gospel, Jesus is teaching in the Temple. It will prove to be his last visit to the Temple, for he will shortly be arrested, condemned and executed. As we follow his story, we learn that Jesus knew that this was going to happen to him, and that he voluntarily embraced it. (Luke 9:51) And this does not mean that we, as followers of Jesus, should race out and seek martyrdom. What it is to say is, as Jesus puts it in John's Gospel: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." (John 15:12-14) The poor widow of today's Gospel was putting her 'penny' into the 'treasury,' which is a way of saying that she was giving alms, putting her

‘two small coins’ into the poor box. In Jesus’ day, Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving were the traditional means people used to live the good life (c.f.: Matthew 6:1ff), the traditional ways that people loved God-and-neighbour ‘with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ (Mark 12:29-31) In giving her all to God, ‘all she had to live on,’ this poor widow was doing what Jesus himself was about to do: She was ‘laying down her life for her friends,’ and she did this willingly. Her gesture was her expression of her truly great love for God’s little ones,’ the *anawim*. (Matthew 5:3) In this she is a type of the Christ (c.f.: Matthew 25:40, 45. See also 1 Kings 17:10-16), and it is this that Jesus is pointing out to his disciples, that they might learn how to do the same, that they might learn how to do this, learn how they might follow him and be like him. To learn how to do this, is what the rich man would have to learn in coming to be with Jesus; it is the ‘one thing he lacked’ that he needed to get into the Kingdom. (Mark 10:21)

We all need to learn to love as this poor widow loved (c.f.: Matthew 10:42), and this we are commanded to do: As Jesus puts it, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35) In this poor widow, Jesus is showing his disciples an example of what they are called to be: One like him, an Image of God’s great Love in the world. (John 3:16; Genesis 1:27. C.f.: Rule of St Benedict 2:12)