

**PENTECOST XXIV Year B 7 November 2021**

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White  
in St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut  
***I Kings 17.8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9.24-28; Mark 12.38-44***

*The Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and the widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.*

For the past year, our Gospel readings have been mostly from Mark's Gospel, and in three weeks when Advent begins --this is the Seventh Sunday before you Christmas-- that will change and for most of next year we will be hearing from Luke's Gospel. And so on this morning we are hearing a story from very close to the end of Mark's Gospel, just before the stories of Jesus' arrest and Passion begin; it is really the end of a set of teachings that he offers just after his Palm Sunday entrance to Jerusalem.

We need to remember that the Gospels are not little biographies of Jesus, but are rather theological reflections by some of his followers --we call them Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John-- on what Jesus' ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing, and also his death and Resurrection, meant to them.

And so the fact that Mark puts the story of the widow's tiny offering --'the widow's mite'-- at the very end of the final set of teachings, and before the events leading up to the Last Supper, the arrest, the trial, and the Crucifixion, may suggest that, for Mark, it is a kind of capstone for what Jesus has been saying and doing all along.

Since he had entered the city on Palm Sunday, the Temple leadership --the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes-- have been challenging him, and now he denounces them. They like to be seen in showy garments, to be greeted with reverence and to have the best seats in the house. They pray at length so that their voices fill the room, all the while demanding so much tribute that they 'devour widows' houses', bankrupting the poorest and most vulnerable members of society --people whom they know, as the Psalmist insists, God especially loves.

To illustrate his point, Jesus sits down and watches people paying into the Temple coffers. Many are rich and are ostentatiously making large gifts; but the poor widow puts in a tiny fraction of the usual wage for a day's work, and he praises her for giving more than any of the others have given because she could least afford to give anything at all. She is the example of faithful living --of giving to God what God wants to receive: a faithful heart-- and not the scribes nor the priests.

No reasonably attentive Jew --not one of Jesus' followers, not one bystander, nor even one of the scribes-- could have failed to remember, on hearing Jesus' words, that line from the Psalmist about the widows and also, even more damningly, the story of Elijah and the widow of Zapheth that we have also just heard.

Centuries before Jesus was born, God had sent the prophet Elijah to warn King Ahab that his willingness to allow his Gentile wife, within his kingdom, to worship her own God and not the God of Israel and Judah was blasphemous and would be punished with a drought. God shelters Elijah from the resulting famine by sending him into Gentile territory, where he finds a Gentile woman who is also facing starvation and wants to feed her son, but who is willing to share with the prophet what little they have left to eat and drink.

Her generosity is rewarded with a jar of meal and a jug of oil that are inexhaustible until the drought ends.

You see, God is always confounding our expectations: elegantly crafted prayers, solemnly intoned for an audience, are not more welcome than a few heartfelt words voiced silently. Two thousand shekels from a rich man are not worth more to God than two pennies offered by a poor woman. There is no In Group: God is as willing to work through a impoverished but generous gentile widow as through anyone else. It is someone's --anyone's-- gracious generosity that makes the difference.

Mark carefully positions the story of the widow's tiny but truly sacrificial gift at the very conclusion of his reflections on Jesus' ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. He is about to begin his reflections on the great sacrifice on the cross, and he wants us to notice that Jesus has been preparing his followers to see that horrible event for what it is --a beautiful gift of sacrificial generosity, and not just for an In Group but for everyone.

And that way of showing love --with generosity and self sacrifice, in ways small and not so small-- Jesus has consistently been saying is how each of us comes really and deeply to live. It is, as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, priestly. And it is, in fact, of God. Amen.