
WORD MADE FLESH

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Poverty of Spirit*

King 17:10-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Today's texts - all of them - are lessons about poverty. Jesus, we read in the Gospel, is in the temple, teaching. He withdraws briefly and sits down opposite the treasury and watches the crowd making their offerings. The rich and the well-off come and place large sums into the treasury as befits their station in life.

They are generous, an excellent virtue.

Then a widow comes and places two small coins, hardly worth the effort to count, into the coffers. It is a simple act of no report. Jesus had just finished teaching. As so often he has made a devastating critique in a vivid and simple way. "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and, to be greeted with respect in the market-place, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers."

This part of the text provides most of us with little concern and, perhaps, even a little pride. The rich are few, its their judgement Jesus proclaims.

But that was a few moments ago - in the temple, in the text - when Jesus was teaching. Now, he is sitting near the treasury, seeing how it is that people, generous people all, approach the temple, the place of the presence of the Divine. He sees those who he had been talking about, the scribes and many others with some status and means. He sees the devout widow with her two copper coins.

"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty...."

"But she out of her poverty..." are deeply disturbing and demanding words for the rich as well as for those of us who are well off or just getting by. They do not demand that we be more generous although that, perhaps, goes without saying. Rather, the demand is a radical one: that we shed our pride. We are enjoined by this story to become what the widow was, a person who responds out of poverty, out of emptiness.

The widow, Elijah greeted at the gate of Zarephath that we read about in today's first reading, had such holy poverty. The writer of Hebrews, in the second reading, is reflecting on the meaning of Christ's crucifixion, the ultimate expression of the path of emptiness or "poverty of spirit" which restores the image and likeness of God to the human being. And, in today's Gospel, a widow, who's emptiness perfectly expresses and shares in the kingdom of God. In such emptiness and only there do we, men and women, find the richness, the opulence of life.

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