

Readings for the 32nd Sunday of the Year

FIRST READING: Kings 17:10-16

A reading from the first Book of Kings:

In those days, Elijah the prophet went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the entrance of the city, a widow was gathering sticks there; he called out to her, "Please bring me a small cupful of water to drink." She left to get it, and he called out after her, "Please bring along a bit of bread." She answered, "As the LORD, your God, lives, I have nothing baked; there is only a handful of flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug. Just now I was collecting a couple of sticks, to go in and prepare something for myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid. Go and do as you propose. But first make me a little cake and bring it to me. Then you can prepare something for yourself and your son. For the LORD, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" She left and did as Elijah had said. She was able to eat for a year, and he and her son as well; the jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, as the LORD had foretold through Elijah.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10

Praise the Lord, my soul!

The LORD keeps faith forever, secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets captives free.

Praise the Lord, my soul!

The LORD gives sight to the blind. The LORD raises up those who were bowed down; the LORD loves the just. The LORD protects strangers.

Praise the Lord, my soul!

The fatherless and the widow he sustains, but the way of the wicked he thwarts. The LORD shall reign forever; your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

Praise the Lord, my soul!

SECOND READING: Hebrews 9:24-28

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf. Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own; if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world. But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice. Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment, so also Christ,

offered once to take away the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Mark 12:38-44

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

In the course of his teaching Jesus said to the crowds, "Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets. They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation." He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, "Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 32nd Sunday of the Year

There were, when I was in grammar school, several publications specifically intended for children. One was a monthly news paper. Another, more slickly published, told bible stories with illustrations. My favorite was a comic book. The artists and writers were the same ones who produced some of my favorite secular rags. The comics were intended to entertain, educate and catechize us kids. There was one strip that disturbed me at ten or eleven and disturbs me still. It depicted a family, mother, father and two children; a boy and a girl. The mother and children were barefoot. Their house seemed to be made of solid stone or was stucco. There seemed to be a dirt floor, no sink, stove or refrigerator. The only furniture visible was a kitchen table and four chairs around it. All the windows were open to the outside; there was no glass. There were no doors for the open doorways. The family's clothing, though neat and clean, was ill-fitting and very simple.

I wondered then, as I wonder now, what kind of message, overt or subliminal the editors, authors and artists were attempting to convey. I grew up in a two-story frame house that each year needed storm windows. I had at least four pairs of shoes, Sunday, everyday, gym and summer sandal shoes. My clothes always fit. If we left the doors open bugs would get in. We weren't rich or even affluent; we were comfortable. Was this comic strip telling us that some how this family who had very little was the ideal Catholic family? Were the things that made our lives secure and comfortable sinful? Was abject poverty the ideal life for all Catholic families?

What is it about poverty-stricken widows that is so appealing to the biblical authors, prophets and Jesus? The Beatitudes tell us plainly, blessed are the poor, hungry, thirsty and meek. Jesus, in today's gospel has praised this woman for injudiciously spending the last two cents to

support a bunch of priests. To be broke, shoeless, hungry, thirsty and homeless does not sound to me as the kind of life I'd choose. We've read, earlier this year, about the young man who had many possessions. He came seeking from Jesus a way to eternal life. Jesus told him that if he was really serious about his quest, to sell all he had and give all the proceeds to the poor, making someone else rich and leaving himself in poverty. Is that really what God wants of us?

This is bad news for all of us. It seems to be an absurdity. It's getting cold outside. My mind returns to the comic book Catholic family living in a house with no windows, doors, heat and no shoes. The gospel is good news not bad. Is it poverty that God wants from us or something deeper? When I go back to the stories in First Kings and in Mark of these two widows, it's not their poverty but their trust that God rewards. Often when I cite the scriptures, for the sake of rhetoric or literary panache, I purposely leave a bit out. This allows me to come back to what the Scriptures actually said so my point can sound wiser than I really am. There is a quality in people that God seeks, not their state in life; it's the person God desires, not their situation.

The Beatitudes actually bless the poor in spirit, not the impoverished. Jesus admitted that the poor will always be with us and that poverty may not be able to be completely eliminated. Those blest were hungry and thirsty for the sake of justice, not starving or dying of thirst. The rich young man's possessions prevented him, spiritually, from committing to Jesus and his way. I will add that, though we know that he went away from Jesus sadly, Mark also included a detail as the authorities raided the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. The mob attempted to nab a young man wearing only a sheet. They seized the sheet; the youth slipped out of it naked and ran away. Could this have been the same rich young man?

What was the characteristic of these two poor widows? They trusted only in God and God provided. God worked a miracle through Elijah to keep her, her son and him in food for the duration of the drought. Her generosity led to her trusting God. This seems so simple; dangerously so. God doesn't seem to do that very often though. This notion can lead to a foolish presumption. My faith is strong and God will take care of me just because of my powerful faith! How? God works best through us and our actions.

Troubles still come our way. God helps us to deal with them as we act on them. God gives us the strength to live our lives. Often through those who are near to us can help us in trouble. God cares for us through the care of others. I still have to work to earn my salary which pays my bills. God won't pay them. Faith is not magic; trusting God does not abrogate prudence on our part. As a kid, on a few occasions, instead of studying for a test, I prayed to the Holy Spirit for wisdom. That was naïve; I flunked those tests. God helps those who help themselves. Faith is not magic. The grace of God helps us to be responsible and prudent in our actions. One of my scripture professors taught that the second reading is the one with the key to interpreting the other two.

Our salvation depends on God's grace. Jesus, as God, offered his life as ransom for ours. God's gift of salvation was through Jesus' death on the cross. God died for our sins. Yes, the old 1960s statement, "God is dead!" is true, or at least partly. Jesus rose from the dead on Easter. God lives! This is the mystery of Jesus, the real high priest. Jesus promised that he would remain with us until the end of the age. Then, Jesus returned to the father with his Ascension. He sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and promised to return at the end of the age to finalize God's

kingdom. More mystery; how can Jesus be in two places at one time? How can Jesus return if he's still with us? These are the perks of true divinity. God is infinite, eternal and unconditional. It is in this that we trust, not to win the lottery or be protected from hurt and pain. Heaven and earth are in a process of transformation as are we. It will all come together when Jesus returns. Because we believe in God and in Jesus we can trust Jesus' promise.

We are like the father in the gospel of Mark who sought Jesus help to cure his epileptic son who prayed, "I have faith. Help my lack of faith!" That's the trust that God requests. We come as we are. We are human beings with all our gifts, goodness, weakness and sin. What do we trust God to do when we draw near? God draws near to us. God is love; we trust that truth. These two widows are not our reality; they are part of these stories. They symbolize the qualities that God both seeks in us and offers us at the same time; faith, hope and love. The greatest may indeed be love, but through faith, we can trust.

I like how the gospel began. Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. We are all sinners, of whom I am foremost. This is the context for the good news. This is also what goes on at mass. Jesus invites us to gather together at the Eucharist. Gathering in Jesus we become his body and blood. There we know Jesus as we break bread. We receive Jesus as the outward sign that this inward, unseen reality takes place. We trust Jesus at his Word and in his promise of eternal life and the Kingdom of God. When mass ends each time we gather, Jesus sends us out into a waiting world as witnesses. We trust that Jesus accompanies us in witness.

Our greatest challenge is not to know how Jesus has saved us and has been near us or to anticipate how Jesus will return. These are relatively easy. To know Jesus now, as we live and need him is a true challenge. Jesus transforms us now. Often we don't feel it, but we can try to notice. As believers, we still live faith, not our feelings. God is just a thought away.

I have always been intrigued by the subtle power of Mark's narrative. What connection do the scribes have with this widow? They are both part of the same passage. Why are they linked? Please note well that I too wear long robes at mass. I stand, at mass, in front of the entire congregation and recite long prayers. I have never, though taken anyone's home away from them. People can offer me gifts for the services I offer too. They are never necessary because I earn a salary as a priest. Most of the time, I suggest that they place what they offer me, themselves, in the collection basket when they next come to mass. Some times people insist that I accept their gift and I do to avoid conflict. I mention this because I'm still only human as a priest, just another sinner who needs God's gifts as does anyone else. Jesus' words aren't meant for people in the third person. Jesus words are meant for us who read them. It is our witness that shares God's grace.

The widow knew that God did not take the collection to heaven. She knew what money served; to pay the bills. God knows, she had them. So do we! The temple had an overhead. Our parish is no different. We have bills to pay too. Was it her livelihood that the scribes were to devour? If she knew the story, she still donated all she had. Was her choice a blind one? The temple treasury paid the temple's bills but it also served as a source to support widows, orphans, the blind and lame. Judaism, from its beginnings, has always cared for the poor.

In a previous parish I was the chaplain for their St. Vincent De Paul Society. When I arrived, they had a sizeable savings' account. They were at best cautious and at worst miserly about spending any money aside from buying Thanksgiving and Christmas turkeys. I discovered that we had many calls a year from people needing financial help. I suggested that they spent the money they collected on the poor. These included families with children, senior citizens and people with special needs. This they did. Eventually, their bank account dwindled to near nothing.

"Trust God, you told us!" they cried, "What are we to do?" "Trust God and let the good people, here, know our need," I replied. We set up a special collection for the Sunday before Thanksgiving. I made the appeal for them and addressed specifically the people the society had helped throughout the years. They responded well and continued to do so each time the De Paulians depleted their account. Generosity can build on itself. The gospel did not relate the widow's fate. Perhaps as she trusted God enough to give away all she had, the temple system worked and God through God's people cared for her. Can we trust God too? God changes the hearts of God's people through the gift of faith.

How do we trust God? Because God has trusted us in love. God trusted the widow would give Elijah what he needed. Her subsequent actions showed God's trust. The same is true with the woman's donation. Jesus' words of her praise showed the prior presence of God's grace or gift to her. Our transformation in Christ, our promise of eternal life, forgiveness of our sins and our faith in God are all gifts that God has first given to us so we can believe, love and trust.

God has entrusted us with faith in Jesus; may we trust God and each other.

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