Sermon for RCL Year B 32 in Ordinary

Readings 1 Kings 17:8-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

The Widow’s Mite story is one that has troubled me for years. Are we really expected to give our last penny? Or is the story symbolic, suggesting that true faith surrenders all to Jesus in terms of all one’s heart, mind and spirit without holding back? Or is it about something else, more specific, within the Gospel?

A break-through came for me when I read the passage in the context of the unfolding drama leading to the crucifixion.

The events leading up to this start with Mark 11.12 with the cursing of the fig tree. Everything that unfolds is in the light of this strange passage. The tree appears to be fruitful and healthy from a distance, but up close it has no figs.

The Cleansing of the Temple on Palm Sunday which follows this episode is the beginning of the confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities in Jerusalem. The Widow’s Mite is the culmination and turning point in the ensuing Holy Week story.

The confrontation is opened by the CHIEF PRIESTS who challenge Jesus to explain by what right he overturned the tables in the Temple. Jesus answers by telling the parable of the Vineyard in which the tenants have taken over the vineyard and mistreated every representative the owner has sent, until they even devise a plan to kill the owner’s son. The priests knew exactly what Jesus was saying by this, that they were the unruly tenants and he was the loyal son. They wanted to arrest Jesus on the spot, but were afraid of the crowd and so backed off.

The PHARISEES then stepped in hoping to exploit Jesus’ sense of authority and trick him into challenging the Emperor’s authority in Rome by showing him a silver coin and asking if they should pay their taxes to Caesar?

Jesus’ answer implies that Caesar can have his dues because Caesar’s authority, undisputed and absolute in the world, was not sufficient to impugn his own greater authority – because to obey Jesus is to do what God requires - clearly outranking anything Caesar might or might not demand. Jesus neither disputed Caesar’s worldly power, but neither saw it in the same league to rival his own divine power.

The SADDUCEES then have a go, since the priests and Pharisees have both failed to better this man from Nazareth. They try to make Jesus challenge the authority of Moses – since many Jews would have been glad to see Jesus challenge Caesar anyhow – in the hope that they could portray Jesus as a blasphemer against the Law of Moses.

Jesus answered that God’s proclamation from the burning bush that he was God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob proves that the very basis of the Sadducees’ understanding of Moses was mistaken – since God is God of the Living and not the Dead. The Sadducees did not believe in eternal life because they could find no reference to it in the Books of Moses. Clearly, they were wrong, if Moses had heard that God was still the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Finally, a LAWYER or SCRIBE has a go at Jesus, but by this time, he is so impressed by Jesus that his question about the greatest Commandment comes across as a genuine question rather than a device to ensnare Jesus for prosecution. So when Jesus replies that the essence of the Law of Moses is to love God and love your neighbour as yourself, the lawyer enthusiastically agrees, adding that these are indeed far more important than any sacrifices of animals. The lawyer says this in the Temple where the Jewish people have offered such sacrifices for the past one thousand years.

Thus Mark has given us a drama in which Jesus has refuted each of the opposing groups in turn, thereby demolishing the whole edifice of Judaism and the role of the Temple itself.

Having refuted each argument in turn, Jesus then poses his own question: *How can the Messiah be David’s descendent only, if David, in one of his psalms, calls the Messiah his Lord and God?*

The clear claim being repeated here is that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and at the same time, the Son of God. He is the son of the owner of the Vineyard, which is Israel, whom they are plotting to kill.

THIS IS THE CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE WIDOW’S MITE.

First, Jesus summarises his condemnation of his opponents; he warns his followers about the dangers of Teachers of the Law with their ostentatious robes and their public acclaim and tells them to be wary of them as they try to inveigle themselves especially among widows, off whose generosity they seek to live.

IF JESUS IS CONDEMNING THE PHARISEES FOR ROBBING WIDOWS BLIND, HE CAN’T BE USING THIS WIDOW’S MITE AS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT HE EXPECTS HIS FOLLOWERS TO DO.

The Widow gives all that she has to God: her last coins. There is no reserve. She has made the ultimate act of faith. Jesus did not go on to tell the disciples that his followers were expected to put in their very last coins; and the Church has never demanded that; even monastic vows of poverty are given in the knowledge that you are entering a supportive community on which you can rely for food and shelter. In the Book of Acts when the first Christians pool all their resources together, they are doing so in the knowledge that they will receive what they need from the combined wealth.

So why did Jesus call his disciples to look at the example of this widow?

Well, I believe it was because her act symbolised his action – he was about to give his all on the cross; no way back; nothing in reserve; an act of absolute trust in God the Father.

This is why the passage then moves on to the foretelling of the destruction of the Temple.

By this act of self-sacrifice, by his body given freely and unreservedly on the cross, Jesus was going to put an end to the ways of the Temple in accordance with the way he had defeated in argument all those who had tried to defend it.

The Widow’s Mite is less a symbol of the action of future Church-goers, and more a symbol of the self-giving of Christ which will be the foundation of the New Temple – which is his Resurrected Body – the Church in which deacons will be set aside to provide for the needs of widows – not to extract their last penny.

So what are we to do?

Live as those for whom Jesus gave his all.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**April 2018**