

*A second look at the widow*

Considering today's passage from Mark's Gospel with Remembrance Sunday in mind, I was, as always, wondering how on earth I might connect the two: how a story of a poor widow with her two small coins in the temple of Jerusalem two thousand years ago might connect with big, contemporary issues of war and peace. It didn't seem like an easy fit. The temptation might be to seek out another passage – until, as you'll gather from the children's talk earlier, one phrase leapt out at me from these verses: it's the phrase which says of the widow that 'she has put in everything she had.' The original Greek in which the passage was written says, literally, that she put in 'all the living of her' – or, in other words, 'she gave her whole' life. And suddenly – wow, what a great passage for Remembrance Sunday! What a perfect fit for this occasion!

Well, yes indeed, though in fact it may be an even richer and deeper passage for this occasion than we first realise, when we notice that there are two ways of reading this passage, two perspectives on it which give rather different meanings. The first way of reading it is fairly obvious. Jesus is in Jerusalem and he is visiting the temple and he notices people putting money into the treasury, which consisted of thirteen large collecting boxes. Temples, after all, are expensive buildings to maintain. And we here at the English Reformed Church know all about that and we have our collecting box – and we hope that the thousands of tourists who visit this church each year will be generous. And I guess that those who empty our collecting box are used to finding small coins rattling around at the bottom. As well as the notes there will always be a few 5 cent coins, throwaway loose change, hardly worth including. Well, whoever counted the treasury boxes in Jerusalem that day would have found two very small coins – in fact the smallest coins in circulation. And they might have paled into insignificance alongside the bigger coins, the bigger donations. But Jesus knew who put those coins in because he was watching, and he saw that poor widow – one of the most vulnerable people in society – and he saw her dropping them in, and he realised that what she had given was for more than the bigger offerings, for it was all that she had. She gave her life.

I wonder if maybe Jesus saw himself in that woman. After all, here he was in Jerusalem for the last week of his life. In a matter of days he would be arrested and executed and he would understand what would happen as a giving

of his whole life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Maybe he saw in her costly self-giving a premonition of his own. And it's not such a big step to tie her deed to what we commemorate today – those who, like her, consciously and deliberately gave their lives for a cause. In some ways she is such a worthy symbol of the fallen who we commemorate. After all, she didn't have much to give. Her offering made little impact on the economy of the temple, yet she gave what she had. And so too with many who gave their lives in wars. The problem with war is that it makes us feel so helpless. The weight of evil is so great and what we have to offer is so small and seemingly ineffective. Yet people give what they have. They offer their lives and every single one counts.

So this woman can stand for us as a symbol of all those who freely and willingly gave their all. And Jesus celebrates her sacrifice: '... she out of her poverty has put in everything she had...'

There is, however, another way of reading this story which presents this woman in a different light, and for this we need to backtrack a little. This whole chapter 12 of Mark's Gospel is, remember, a series of controversies between Jesus and the religious establishment who are trying to catch him out. Here Jesus comes toe-to-toe with the religious authorities of his day and what he saw as their corrupt and distorted practices. So Jesus warns people in verse 38 to 'beware of the scribes' with their ostentatious display of long robes and top-tier seats. But then comes this stinging rebuke, 'they devour widows' houses...'. Jesus here is condemning the whole religious system, centred on the temple, which extorts money out of those least able to afford it, like widows, and which bleeds them dry. And is it any accident that this reference to the abuse of widows is followed immediately by this story of the widow putting into the temple treasury her last two small coins? On this reading Jesus may be commending this widow for her generosity but he is also condemning the system that makes people have to do that. On this reading Jesus looks upon this woman not just with affirmation but also with anger at the forces that conspire to make her do this. On this reading Jesus' words, 'this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury... she out of her poverty has put in everything she had...' are said with deep sorrow and anger. It's like the indignation that we might feel when the task of sorting the economy and eliminating the deficit falls hardest on the poorest. Jesus is appalled at what this widow has had to do. And it's very fitting that if we had read on, in the next incident that follows this, Jesus comes out of the temple

and declares that the entire edifice will soon be thrown down so that one stone will not be left standing upon another, as indeed took place 40 years later when Jerusalem was ransacked by the Romans. Then the whole rotten system that impoverishes widows will come to a violent end.

Now, on this reading this woman is less a willing giver and more a vulnerable victim. She is less an active participant and more someone caught up in something that destroys her life. And from this perspective this woman might represent the victims of war. Indeed it's interesting that she is a widow for traditionally – and of course it is less the case now – but traditionally it is widows and children who are mostly bereaved by war. Look down the long lists of names on war memorials and they are mostly men, but how many of them left behind a widow who perhaps said goodbye to them as they marched off and never saw them again? But beyond her widowhood, consider this woman as a victim who is caught in things far beyond her, a victim who is entrapped in systems and structures and powers and forces far beyond her control. And then we might see her today as a symbol of all those victims of war – victims who have no say in its pursuit and no influence on its outcome but whose lives are blighted by it.

After all, for centuries war was, at least in theory, conducted under the rubrics of what came to be called Just War Theory. In the early years of the church's life to be a Christian was automatically to be a pacifist and to refuse to fight. Later on, however, what became known as Just War theory laid down rules by which war could be said to be justified, and then you could be a Christian and a soldier. But one of the rubrics of Just War Theory was that war should only involve combatants. Prohibited acts ought to include bombing civilian residential areas that include no legitimate military targets, and the committing of acts of terrorism, and reprisal against civilians. But of course over the years, due partly to developments in the nature of weaponry, these principles have been eroded and now it's a sick joke to consider those stipulations. Any fleeting basis in traditional Just War Theory has long since been abandoned and increasingly, along with the heroism and sacrifice of soldiers, war has been characterised by the appalling suffering of civilians, of so-called 'innocent victims', caught in currents of death and destruction and devastation before which they are powerless – just like our widow in the second way of reading this story.

Indeed I suspect that this accounts for some of the ambivalence that some people feel about Remembrance Sunday – and many of our younger generation are ambivalent about it. I suspect that some of the ambivalence has been because the focus in Remembrance celebrations in the past was often largely on the military and on the heroism of those that fought and died. And however right and proper that may be, people are increasingly aware of the victims – not of those who fight heroically and bravely but those who have no say in war, victims whose lives are thrown into turmoil, devastated by the decisions of others, including politicians who rush far too quickly into war. Too often the victimisation of the powerless is caused by the foolish readiness of those in power to engage in what Just War Theory insists should only be a last resort, when every other avenue has been exhausted.

Sadly, on this Remembrance Sunday, this year, today, we are perhaps more aware than ever of victims of war and conflict. Whoever foresaw the vast crowds of refugees from war-torn lands like Syria, displaced people, exiles from their homelands, crossing land and sea in flight, desperate for a safe and secure life in Europe? These are people who, like the widow in our story, are harried and oppressed by forces far beyond them, at the mercy of religious and political powers that manipulate them, and yet still they are capable of showing sacrifice and selflessness. And inspired by our reading this morning, let us remember them and pray for them.

A widow with two small coins in the temple in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. A widow who gave them freely, who gave her all. The same widow a victim of things far beyond her, far beyond her control, but which but blight her life.

This widow, with a little imagination, becomes a symbol of Remembrance Sunday – as we give thanks for those who gave their all, and as we pray for God's mercy upon us - and upon the poor victims who suffer on account of our folly. Amen.