

The widow's plight

I do wonder if there is a more sad and tragic figure in all the world than the widow we encounter in our passage this morning from the 1st Book of Kings. If anyone ever had cause to feel that everything was against them, surely it is she.

Consider her predicament. She lives in a place called Zarephath, alone with her son, and you can imagine the very special bond that ties this mother and son together, this little twosome who together create a zone of survival for themselves in the face of hardship and danger. And there are so many hardships and dangers that she has to contend with, things that threaten her and work against her.

To begin with, yes, she is a widow and that is a tough call in the male-ordered society that she lives in. To be a widow was to be deprived of all security and means, leaving her deeply vulnerable. One thing is for sure. This widow would be dirt poor, scratching together the scraps by which she and her son live their precarious existence. And if being a widow was not enough then she now has a drought to contend with as well. Drought – the great fear that would have stalked the lives of poor peasants like her, for drought meant famine and famine meant hunger and a slow, agonising death. And of course human rights organisations today note that the effects of natural disaster, including drought, fall heaviest upon – you guessed it – widows and orphans. And here they are.

So this woman must contend with widowhood, and she must contend with drought and, what is more, we learn from the story the reason for the drought. The reason for the drought is that there is a contest going on between the gods as to who is the true and living God. In one corner is Baal, and Zarephath, this woman's home town, is his preserve, his territory, his turf. And Baal is a fertility god who claims to control the rain and the weather. And in the other corner is the God of Israel who refuses to be confined to his territory but who insists that he is God of all the earth. And the God of Israel proposes to show that he is the true God by fighting Baal at his strongest point – his claim to control the rain, and that is why he has sent the drought. And it's only in the next chapter of the story in the passage that we looked at last week that the issue is finally resolved. Meanwhile, however, pity this poor woman, victim of

some divine contest, pawn in some alpha-male challenge between the gods, a million miles over her head, of which she knows or cares nothing. And yet it is her life that is on the line, and that of her son.

So this woman has widowhood to contend with. And she has drought to contend with. And she has the very gods above to contend with and it must seem as if all the powers in heaven and on earth are targeting her, orchestrating her humiliation and destruction – and that of her son. And now we are presented with the forlorn picture of this mother gathering sticks to cook one last meal, one last pathetic meal in which she will sprinkle the last remains of her flour and pour out the final drops of her oil and then she and her son will give up the struggle and await an agonising death. And what terrors must that hold for them – the terrible fear of a mother having to watch her child die like that, yet desperately fearful of the alternative – of her dying first. It is an unimaginably heart-breaking scene. And all because of forces in heaven and earth that are arrayed against her and against which she is powerless.

Well, if that is not enough to contend with there now enters upon the scene another threat, another unwelcome intrusion. Suddenly this man of God is at her gate - this Elijah, and we need to know his story. He is a prophet of the God of Israel and he is the one who has pronounced the drought and brought it about and he too has been suffering its effects. We are told earlier in the chapter that he has been living by a small stream and that he has been fed by the birds – ravens who brought him bread and meat in the morning and evening and with the water from the stream he thus survived. But now the stream has dried up and so Elijah appears and requests of this destitute woman a drink of water and a piece of bread. And is that not the very last thing she needs - she, a powerless and vulnerable widow being asked this by a man? To be down to her last meal, her last oil, and now to be asked to share it – and note that Elijah asks that she bake him a cake first and only then to prepare something for herself and her son. What is she to make of this? Is this not just one more assault on her, one more evil out to get her? And Elijah makes this ridiculous, absurd promise. Feed me in this way and your meal and your oil will not fail until the rains come. Can she believe such a preposterous promise? Would you? Well, she does – and it comes true. She and her son are saved, and at last she has something to celebrate. At last she has been blessed. Maybe the world is not such a heartless and cruel place after all. Yes, it seems at times that this woman is misaligned with the very stars in their courses and that everything is set

against her. But here is reassurance. Miracles do happen. Oil and meal multiply. Starvation is thwarted. Life prevails.

And that would make a happy end to this story, except that just when we reach this conclusion, just when all is well, what happens next? Well, another blow falls, a killer blow. Just when this woman thought that her son had escaped the jaws of death they clamp down on him. We're told that the boy became ill and there was no breath left on him. So much for the widow's short-lived joy. So much for her celebration that she had survived the drought. So much for blessing. Just when she thought that the world was showing her a more benign face, this happens. Just when you think you've beaten the drought disease gets you instead. And what depths of despair and anger we hear in her words to Elijah! 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son.' Here this woman finally speaks out her bitterness at a world that treats her so. Here all her accumulated resentment at the world she inhabits and all that she has to contend with find expression. Here she stands, a woman, a widow, scratching around to feed her son in a drought, while the gods engage in their rivalries and humans suffer the fallout, and all her anger and outrage are targeted at God and this prophet who represents him. What have you against me, O man of God?

Well, of course, the boy is raised by Elijah, brought back to life. Life prevails and thank God for that, but as we read this story with its ups and downs and its ebb and flow we have to pause and consider the world that is presented to us here. It's a world where deep forces are at work that are far beyond our control. On the one hand there are forces of death and this woman knows all about those. She is a widow, after all. Death has robbed her of her husband. Death has robbed her of her security. And she encounters death again in the drought and the hunger and the fear for her son. And she is stalked by death again in the loss of her son, her dear, beloved boy. This woman is assailed and she is powerless against these things, never knowing where the next assault is going to come from.

There is, however, another power at work in her world, besides death. Call it grace. It's the power by which the birds feed Elijah – whoever hear of such a thing? Ravens are scavengers, they scrounge food for themselves. Whoever hear of them providing food for others? And grace is present here too in the meal and the oil that do not run out. And grace is present in the raising of the widow's son.

This is this widow's world and it is our world: one in which death is at work – but so too is grace. The problem is however that both of them operate entirely randomly. They are beyond our control and we cannot be sure where and when and how they will strike next. Take death. It may be the loss of a loved one, it may be a redundancy, it may be a health matter, it may be a terrorist outrage – death breaks in unannounced, unforeseen, unpredictable. But so too does grace. Elijah was unexpectedly fed by ravens. The widow's oil and the meal multiplied out of the blue. Her son was raised, miraculously. Death and grace – both are random and unpredictable and beyond human managing and control. And so this widow comes to us powerless, at the mercy of an uncertain and capricious world.

Except for one thing. She does have power to show kindness and generosity to others. Sure, she has no power over the drought, but she does have power to say yes or no to Elijah, to do this trusting, selfless thing. Sure, she has no power over the food supply but she does have the power to be gracious and generous to Elijah and to say 'yes' to his request. Widows in her times tended to be like the ravens, receivers rather than givers, scavengers rather than providers. But she has the power to be like the ravens who fed Elijah, so becoming a channel of grace.

Here is the world you and I inhabit and experience. It's one in which death strikes and so does grace – randomly, capriciously, indiscriminately, beyond our reckoning and control. But we are not entirely at the mercy of such a world. We have choices. We can choose to be generous. We can choose to be gracious. We can choose kindness. We can choose the things that bring blessing to others -as this poor woman did. And to make such life-giving choices is to defy the circumstances over which we are powerless.

So come now to this table where the widow's meal and oil are transformed into bread and wine. Come and taste divine grace and generosity – and then go and live accordingly. Amen.

O gracious, generous God,
come to your world, we pray,
and bring grace and life where the power
of death is at work.

We pray today for countries affected by
drought and famine and climate change –
and we pray especially for Malawi,
and for the Mulanje Mission Hospital,
for Ruth Shakespeare, its medical director, and all her staff.
O God may it be a place of grace and hope.

And as we think this morning of the widow of Zarephath

Lord in your mercy
graciously hear us.

O God, as we have thought this morning of this widow and her son we pray you to take pity on the lost and the lonely, the marginalised and the oppressed, those women and men and children for whom change seems impossible. In your mercy, we ask that you remember those who live in poverty, and whose plight seems to go unheard and unnoticed.

Lord in your mercy,
graciously hear us.

O God we pray for your church.
May it be a place where grace is shown,
where new life is celebrated,
where generosity of spirit is nurtured
and where your love is made known.
And so may we grow and your kingdom extend.

Lord in your mercy,
graciously hear us.

And God we pray today for those who would join us here at your table but who cannot because of illness or infirmity. May they know that they belong here, and that nothing can separate them from your love. and may they know the care and support of their brothers and sisters in Christ. And as we come to this table we take a moment of silence to bring our special needs and requests to you, praying for your strength as we receive here at this table...

Lord in your mercy,
graciously hear us.