

*The widow's sacrifice*

At first sight our reading this morning from Mark's Gospel is fairly straightforward. 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. And as Jesus watches he sees this poor widow – one of the most vulnerable people in society – putting in her two small coins which amounted to almost nothing, and certainly nothing in comparison to the big sums being put in by rich people. Jesus, however, knew that what she had given was far more than the bigger offerings for it was all that she had. And so he commended her. And the story lends itself to a simple moral: generosity is a blessed virtue, even when we don't have much, and the story might be used a subtle prompt to church members to give generously to the church, a reminder which – as church treasurers know well – is sometimes necessary.

There is, however, rather more to the story than this, and to grasp this we need to backtrack a little. You see, the setting of the incident in its wider context in Mark's Gospel is 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 their 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 this widow, and which bleeds them dry. And what is worse is that in these latter chapters of Mark's Gospel Jesus is making plain that the Jerusalem temple, this mighty edifice, has no future. It is ear-marked for destruction! In Jesus' mind the Jewish people of his day do not know the things that work for peace but are set on a course that will lead ultimately to rebellion against Rome and a brutal crushing defeat. The temple will be laid to waste. And Jesus has not long since prefigured that by invading the temple and driving out the money-changers, symbolising the coming destruction. And suddenly we view this woman's actions in giving all that she had in a different light. She was giving all she had – but for what purpose? She was making a sacrifice – but for what? The passage tells us that this widow 'put in everything she had', and 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’. But what was she giving her whole life for? The upkeep of a building with a demolition order attached. What was the point of that? Was it worth it?

Here, of course, is where this passage begins to bite, not least on this occasion, this Remembrance Sunday when we recall those who made the supreme sacrifice in war – who gave their whole lives. At the risk of being controversial, we surely have to ask whenever a war is fought: was it worth it? Was it worth the cost in bloodshed? Was it like this widow’s sacrifice – a costly self-giving to a lost cause? And we might prefer to blank that question, but we can’t, and certainly it is a responsibility of Christians who serve the Prince of Peace to face it.

Take the 1<sup>st</sup> World War whose ending we recall exactly 100 years ago today. It has been estimated that in that conflict over 16 million people died: around 10 million military personnel and just under 7 million civilians – and of course there were a far greater number of wounded and maimed who were scarred for life. The numbers are mind-boggling – what cause could conceivably justify such suffering and loss of life? And we hear about the horrors of trench warfare and futile combat, with thousands of lives lost for a few metres of mud gained. And of course those soldiers who survived were promised a return to ‘a land fit for heroes’, when in fact they returned to the economic turmoil of the 20s and the 30s and high unemployment and the Great Depression. And of course the 1<sup>st</sup> World War was dubbed ‘the war to end all wars’ but the deeply resented terms of the Treaty of Versailles helped to make that an impossible dream. And the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not exactly fulfil that hope, ‘the war to end all wars’, that most bloody of centuries. And so we ask: was it worth it?

Most people would agree that it is easier to answer that question affirmatively with regard to the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, that a necessary price was paid, despite the appalling death toll. But what of more recent wars? What about Vietnam where an estimated 58,000 Americans died, with the overall number on all sides likely exceeding a million? Was it worth it? The US Secretary of Defence at the height of the war and a fierce advocate of it, Robert McNamara, later confessed to deep regret and remorse for US mistakes: ‘we were wrong, terribly wrong’ he confessed, ‘and we owe it to future generations to explain why.’ And what of Northern Ireland? Can those who died for the cause rest in

peace? Was it worth it? Or Iraq? Can the death toll be justified by the emergence of a more peaceful and stable world? And of course there are other conflicts where there would be a strong case for concluding with a heavy heart that yes, it was worth it. It was justified. There was no choice.

But we return to this widow, and her sacrificial offering, her costly giving to a doomed temple. And we might see in her a symbol of futility, of pity, of lives laid down for lost causes, sacrifices made that were just not worth it. Yet Jesus, despite his perspective on the temple, does not seem to see it that way. He could have told her to keep her coins, to save them for a better purpose – but he did not. He commended her. And soon after this a woman will come to Jesus and break open a jar of very costly ointment and anoint Jesus and that too could be seen as a pointless gesture, a waste. But no, Jesus commends her. And maybe that is because these acts were done in good faith, from good motives, out of love – irrespective of their effects or what they achieved.

And here I want to put this widow's self-sacrifice into a much wider context. I want to suggest that that acts of self-giving, done in good faith, acts that cost us, are central to our humanity, essential to our becoming fully human beings. Indeed I would suggest to you that self-giving lies at the very heart of creation, the very constitution of the universe. So, think of God's act of creation in the beginning. Try, if you can, to drawback the curtain of time and imagine the life of God in eternity – an eternal fellowship of love, an eternal communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And God has no need to create but is perfect and complete in himself. Yet out of an abundance of love God calls creation into being. But that is an act of self-giving, of self-sacrifice. In creating the cosmos God creates space for us but in so doing limits and constrains himself. And that means that self-sacrifice runs through the DNA of creation, and the Book of Revelation peers into the mysterious depths of the universe and sees there a lamb slain from the foundation of the world. And so we go on: in the fullness of time God emptied himself in Christ, laying aside his glory and being born in human likeness, becoming a servant – an act of self-sacrifice. And that, of course, leads to his death upon a cross – in the words of our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, 'he has appeared once for all... to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.' And so creation connects to Calvary as the self-giving love that spilled over in the beginning now spills over in the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross.

Self-sacrifice, then, lies in the heart of God, and it lies at the heart, therefore, of what it means to be made in the image of God. And this is something we need to learn in an age where there is great emphasis on self-fulfilment, on discovering our true selves, on maximising our potential and becoming all that we can be – but we aren't very sure how to go about it. And the word is that the key to it all lies in asserting ourselves and trying to grab more and to produce more and to consume more and to be more, but it doesn't work. This is not humanising us. What we who strive to bear the image of God must learn is that self-fulfillment, paradoxically, cannot come without self-giving and self-sacrifice; that in order to gain life we have to be ready to lose it; that in order to live we must be prepared to die; that in surrendering ourselves to loss there is a mysterious, gratuitous gain. It's what we see symbolised and enacted in the Christian rite of baptism which tells us that in laying ourselves down we rise to new life.

Well, we've explored the big picture: creation, the universe, Christ, the cross – and so we return to the widow in the temple with her little offering. The cause to which she gave may have been already lost but she nevertheless comes to us graced with the image of God. In a competitive and often ruthless world she gives us a glimpse of the secret of our humanity. And she speaks to us too of those who sacrificed their lives in wars – sometimes, apparently, in a futile cause. This is not to justify pointless and destructive wars. It is not to try to put a gloss on the shameful waste of life and the sheer pity and tragedy of war. But it is to recognise that we are never more fully human than when we give of ourselves in love and in good faith - whatever the outcome. And in the spirit of this widow, let us never, ever underestimate the significance of little acts of kindness – small acts of love that may cost us, but which season life, and which humanise us, and which make the world a more gracious and generous place to live. Opportunities for such sacrificial self-giving abound. They are all around us. Let us embrace them, and so honour the fallen. Amen.