

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 8 NOVEMBER 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Mark 12: 38-44

“Seeing the Truth”

1. Was the widow's giving superior devotion?

Traditionally the story of the poor widow giving all her money to the temple has been described as “a beautiful act in the desert of official devotion.”

A number of commentators suggest it expresses an act of extreme generosity: of self-forgetfulness, loyalty and devotion to God's call, humility and detachment from possessions.

And yet, for Addison Wright if her giving is understood in these terms, such an act is based on misguided piety:

... apart from the text, if any one of us were actually to see in real life a poor widow giving the very last of her money to religion, would we not judge the act ... to be based on misguided piety because she would be neglecting her own needs?

The Widow's Mite: Praise or Lament? —A Matter of Context,

Catholic Biblical Quarterly 1982, 44,

2. “Seeing” the widow's gift differently

An alternative understanding avoids this romanticism of this widow's act.

This different interpretation notes that Jesus warns the people to “watch out for the scribes” who devour widows houses, and is then found *watching* the behaviour of the widow.

Jesus looks, sees, watches. Observes. This looking, seeing, watching, can be compared to the divine view of the way humans treat each other, a discernment that exposes unjust ways of living together. Eduard Schweizer writes that:

“There are Indian, Greek and Jewish, parallels: for example, God is supposed to have spoken (in a dream) to a rabbi who had refused to receive a handful of meal as a gift from a widow, saying, ‘Do not look down on her, it is as if she has offered herself’.

Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, 259.

In a story before our reading, Jesus has engaged in a debate about where the authority of the future coming Messiah lies. He has challenged the popular belief that the people should look forward to the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, and that the Messiah is the son of David. Rather, the Davidic tradition must submit to the authority of the Messiah. This means a way of faith and living that will be different to just restoring David's kingdom.

Here in our story, Jesus is challenging specific aspects of the religious, social and political system. And this requires a perceptive way of looking at the way life is lived.

What is primary for Jesus is not what he sees, but **what he sees with**, and his ability to see what others see with. He investigates and assesses the multiple points of perception, to use Kirsten Hastrup's language, in *A passage to Anthropology*, xi. And in this way, he "looks" at the ideology of the people, as I said last week, and ideology is what we see **with and through**, that which creates our identity, faith and practice.

3. Condemning institutions that disempower people

Visually, in a time before TV or movies or newspapers, the visual body, the spoken word, the physical presence of people in positions of power, all these influence and reinforce the power of place of each person.

So, a kind of internal, cultural screen, like our movie screens, builds up a range of images through which each person knows who they are, where they fit in society and what they should do, but this is always in contrast to others - in their class, religion, age, nationality race, and sexuality.

On this internal cultural screen, in our story, on the widow's internal cultural screen, the scribes were positioned and shaped as superior. Their long robes, impractical for manual labor, identify them as professionals. Their positions give them public honors. In the marketplace, people rise respectfully when they approach. In the synagogue, scribes sit in seats of honor on the dais.

This is the ideology shaping their lives and Jewish lives. It acts like a screen filled with the authority of these symbols.

Widows would have identified with this ideology. They accepted their roles and powerlessness that this cultural screen offered. They internalised it.

Widows were not entrusted to manage their deceased husband's affairs. So, because the scribes acquired public trust through their dress and piety, they earned the legal right to administer the estates of widows, receiving a percentage of assets. Jewish writings show that embezzlement and abuses did occur.

Added to this, when the widow put all her money into the temple treasure, I suggest along with Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, that Jesus was not seeing this as an act of superior piety. Rather, this was a lament. Jesus was condemning any religious institution and its value system that motivates the poor to give all their money.

For the scribes and religious leaders to influence people to come to the Temple and pray and then give money to keep it running unjustly devours the resources of the poor. Worse still, the people then believe that God demands such faith and practice.

She has given everything, and in that she is a model of giving, but the lamentable thing is the institution has let her down. The institution and its leaders are judged as inadequate for influencing people to seek acceptance and validation through such practice.

4. The widow, a story to influence change

In our story today, we see yet again, how Mark's Jesus uncovers ideology, and exposes the inner cultural screens that shape their faith and practice. He does this to enable people to see and make sense of the mystifying nature of their context and who they are. He critiques ideology with his own radical ideology of compassion, equality and mutuality.

These stories are strategies for breaking out of the hold that the inner cultural screen has on people in various contexts.

5. The Lemon Tree, a widow takes on a nation

The film *The Lemon Tree* tells the story of Salma Zidane, a poor 45 yr-old Palestinian widow who, similarly to our biblical widow, occupies a place of extreme powerlessness in both her Palestinian society and her neighbouring Israeli nation.

As the movie begins, we “see” a lemon tree, rich in yellow fruit and green leaves, set in a sunny lemon grove. Our next visual contact is with hands holding a knife and cutting succulent, sour lemons. Then we see Salma’s face, calm, content and free in her own home and activity.

The calmness is disturbed by the sound of a removalist truck bringing furniture to the house adjoining her lemon grove. When she walks outside into her grove to view the truck, she sees the Israeli Secret Service. When they see her, she is considered a potential terrorist and her lemon grove a terrorist’s delight. This is to become the house where the Israeli Defence Minister will live.

The next morning, a local advisor and the head of Secret Services, Gilad, are standing in her lemon grove. The advisor is trying to assure Gilad that Salma is only a poor, lonely widow who hardly survives off the 50 yr-old grove. When Gilad continues to question security, the advisor says: “Gilad, security fences, watch towers, sensors, soldiers, the Secret Service. Not enough? What else can we do?”

The paranoia results in her receiving a letter with an order for the “immediate and absolute military necessity” of cutting down the whole lemon orchard. The letter is written in Hebrew, and she can’t read it. So she must go to the West Bank to the village leader for translation. She must humiliate herself by entering a male only card den, where the elder informs her of the contents. The Israeli government says she is eligible for compensation. As she leaves timidly, the elder reminds her that Palestinians don’t take Israeli money.

Disempowered by both her own and an alien nation, she summons the courage to find a lawyer and takes the case to the Israeli High Court. She refuses to remain bound by the identity that these societies give her. She resists cultural, religious and political power. She does not see herself as they see her. She demands justice and she fights for her dignity and rights. She has not developed a strong inner cultural screen which demands she act and think in ways submissive to authority and power. Authority and power that are unjust and demeaning!

Conclusion

Returning to our Markan text, the verse following this one finds Jesus turning his back on the Temple. This would mean for widows: your beautiful act is received by God, it is misdirected, the fault of the institution, and now you are free to practise loving God and neighbour differently.

Yet, the greatest challenge for all of us seeking freedom from any form of dominant symbolic screen, is that it has been internalised as truth, and this requires the strength and courage that Salma exhibited to live according to compassion, equality and mutuality.