

SERMON: Sunday – 26 February 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

The Might of the Widow

Psalm 17:1-9 and Mark 12:38-44

Let me give a bit of context to the story of the widow and her mighty offering.

Jesus has been teaching in the Temple Courts in Jerusalem and its nearly Passover, a time when pilgrims from all over the world would come and the population of Jerusalem would swell from some 50,000 to five times that.

Jesus is found in the Court of Women where visitors brought in their offerings and placed them into one of 13 large brass trumpet like vessels fixed to the wall, the heavy sound of metal on metal ringing in your ears. No bank notes, cheques, credit cards or contactless giving in sight. It was all coins, the more the nosier.

It reminded me of a story of a church not far from here which was having a fund-raising campaign to fix the roof and one of the elders stood up the front at the time of the offering. And he said, now I don't want to be hearing the tinkling of coins going into the offering plates. Only notes will do!

Except in this situation, there were no notes, only coins. And the widow's offering wouldn't have made much noise at all. It might've even been surprising that anyone at all noticed. But then God always sees what we offer.

Its not often we think of Jesus being upset and angry but clearly there were times that he was. We find him angry here at the conduct of the teachers of the law, men who should know better, for their hypocrisy and worse, for their abuse of the most vulnerable in society.

Theirs isn't the sort of religion that is of God for it fails the poor and takes advantage of the lowly. Widows were people who depended on the generosity of a caring society, who needed help to get by, or to be given a hand up in a society devoid of health and social services.

Jesus condemns uncaring leaders who make a show of their religion, who dress in flowing robes and make lengthy prayers; who appear on the surface to be holier than thou but who's private action or inaction tells a different story.

It matters to practise what one preaches, to walk the talk. Actions often speak louder than words so its probably even more important to do the right thing than it is to say the right thing. Its more important to do caring acts than it is to talk about doing them.

And any preacher needs to watch out lest they fall in to the trap of only ever speaking of what should be done rather than doing what needs to be done.

And worse still, woe betide the preacher who only ever speaks of doing right and expects others to be the ones who actually do it.

And so that this is not seen to be just about bad preaching, woe betide the follower of Jesus who says one thing but does something else.

I said a moment ago that actions speak louder than words and I mean by that also that sometimes its words that can cause harm of course, and sometimes it can happen without a deliberate intent to harm.

Sometimes someone in position of authority in public life might express their own understanding of their religious faith and end up in a right pickle. We saw that this week where words said got someone into trouble. And in hindsight, after a public outcry, she regretted saying as much as she did.

In a heart sore apology, she has affirmed her belief in the “Inherent dignity of each human being” and pledged to protect people’s rights. In her own words so that all people are able “to live and to love without fear or harassment in a pluralistic and tolerant society”.

She maybe got there in the end - but it wasn’t without embarrassment or upset, something we’ve all done. So let he who is without such sin be the first to criticise.

Of course a persons daily practise (and their daily words) is rooted in ones faith and perhaps sometimes that will cause offence and maybe that’s how it has to be. And some of you will agree with that whilst others will feel believers must do everything they can in order to avoid causing offence.

What surely matters above all is to seek to say and do the right thing at al times. And that’s what we’re aiming at when we gather as God’s people and seek to align our whole lives with God’s ways.

Age often mellows us. Getting older can temper one’s beliefs and practise. I was somewhat surprised to read this week a quote from Billy Graham which he spoke near the very end of his life.

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“Whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Bhuddist world, or the Christian world or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ ... they may not even know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don’t have, and they turn to the only light they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they’re going to be with us in heaven”.

His Biblical interpretation of the Body of Christ certainly took a harder line on inclusion in his younger days.

Its not easy to know what to say all the time and when to keep quiet.

Proverbs 10:19 - When there are many words, wrongdoing is unavoidable, But one who restrains his lips is wise.

Or in the KJV - In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.

Let’s go back to those who don’t practise what they preach and who take advantage of the poor. Jesus said of such people, “These men will be punished most severely” (40).

In other words, it won’t be Jesus as the one to punish them there and then but they will get their due reward in the fullness of time.

Jesus tells his followers not to store up for themselves treasures on earth but in heaven (Matthew 6:19) echoing the belief that ultimately there will be a holy reckoning, where the rights and wrongs done on earth are sorted out, like a farmer separating grain from chaff and the wind blowing the chaff out of sight.

So what is the better way that Jesus commends to us?

Its the way of the widow. In contrast to the showy giving of the crowd, Jesus picks out a poor widow who gave her all.

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

The Lord says to Job,

Be careful that no one entices you by riches; do not let a large bribe turn you aside.
(Job 36:18)

Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.
(Proverbs 11:28)

A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.
(Proverbs 22:1)

And Jesus in Luke 16 says,
if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?
(Luke 16:11)

There's a lot in the Bible about wealth and riches and how we are to relate to them. But the Church is often seen as shying away from speaking of wealth and prefers instead to become caught up in petty statements about moral perfection or human sexuality.

Richard Rohr wrote this week that,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit” are Jesus’ first words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3). And although Jesus made this quite clear throughout his life, we still largely turned Christianity into a religion where the operative agenda was some personal moral perfection, our attaining some kind of salvation, “going to heaven,” converting others rather than ourselves, and acquiring more health, wealth, and success in this world. In that pursuit, we ended up largely aligning with empires, wars, and colonisation of our planet, instead of with Jesus or the powerless. All climbing and little descending, and it has all caught up with us in the twenty-first century.

(Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe*)

And that sounds pretty damning and hopeless but you might be glad to know that he goes on to strike a note of hope when he says,

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“Authentic Christianity is not so much a belief system as a life-and-death system that shows us how to give away our life, how to give away our love, and eventually how to give away our death. Basically, how to give away—and in doing so, to connect with the world, with all other creatures, and with God.”

(Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe*)

To give it all away. Like the poor widow who gave everything she had to live on; who gave her life, as Jesus gave his. Nothing other self-emptying love; a pouring out of life; which, for Jesus, meant even unto death on a cross.

To give it all away and in doing so, to connect with the world, with all other creatures, and with God. That's ultimately what we want; that sense of connection, of oneness with God and with one another; that there be no division between rich and poor, and no enemy to fight.

The story of the widow shows us that giving is to be sacrificial. As Willie Barclay put it,

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“its never the amount of the gift that matters, but the cost of the gift to the giver ... real generosity gives until it hurts (and) if we put all that we have and are at (God's) disposal (God) can do things with it and with us that are beyond our imaginings”.

(William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*)

Sinclair Ferguson, former minister at St George's Tron in Glasgow, said that God, of course, does not need our money. Yet God chooses

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“to use whatever gifts he wants to further his kingdom. He can use a small gift for a great purpose and a great gift for a small purpose. With a great gift, a massive organisation may be set up which is in constant financial difficulties and eventually goes bankrupt; with a small gift, a Gospel, or New Testament may be purchased which leads to the conversion of someone who wins many others to Christ, or is the instrument of great revival - or, for that matter, points a millionaire to Christ!”.

I can testify to that when in Stirling I was involved in a Workplace Chaplaincy launch event which only one person responded to but that one person was just the person we needed to come to faith and go on to do great things.

A small gift from a devoted heart can do great things, mighty things. Because our whole lives are a small gift in the hands of a Mighty God.

The widow and Jesus have shown us the Way. May we find the grace to follow, taking with us as many as we can, on this way of the cross that will lead us all to the Easter God and the Kingdom of Light.