

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH 3 BEFORE ADVENT WEEK 32 YEAR B 7 NOVEMBER 2021

‘Widow’ is the theme linking today’s readings. From the first book of the Kings in the Old Testament we heard how Elijah visited a widow. It was during a drought, though that isn’t mentioned in the extract we read. We get an idea of the desperation the widow faced: just enough food for a final meal; then she and her son faced death. The miraculous happened. The meal and oil did not run out till the rains returned, according to the word of the LORD declared by Elijah, the man of God, the prophet.

The gospel reading has given us the expression ‘the widow’s mite’. The Authorised Version of the Bible, also known as the King James Version, refers to the small coins the widow puts into the temple treasury, as mites.

But the passage begins with Jesus condemning scribes. Who were the scribes? So far as I know they were all men according to the culture of the day. As the word suggests, they could write, and they had some training in applying the Jewish law. They could draw up wills and carry out legal tasks, like administering property on behalf of others. Every village had a scribe. It’s rather like Horninglow having a solicitor, Stretton having a solicitor and so on – though both these suburbs are much bigger than a typical Palestinian village. Their legal function may explain Jesus’ complaint that ‘they devour widows’ houses’ – the implication is that they overcharged for their services, exploiting the poor and vulnerable. Sometimes they are called ‘lawyers’ or ‘teachers of the law’ in our English translations of the New Testament.

Not all scribes were as bad as today’s passage indicates. Earlier in this 12th chapter of Mark’s gospel a scribe asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest. He agrees with Jesus’ answer that loving God is the greatest, closely followed by loving one’s neighbour. Jesus says he is not far from the kingdom of God.

Going back to the gospel reading before us, Jesus criticises scribes for showing off, for pride, for seeking social status and human praise. It’s false piety – rather like a priest thinking and saying, “Don’t I look lovely in my new chasuble?” A chasuble is the outer garment a priest wears when saying mass. I particularly endorse Jesus’ criticism of saying long prayers for the sake of appearance. Certainly in public worship prayers should be concise, and have a structure rather than wander all over the place. Private prayer can be different.

Showing off and so on doesn't actually harm other people. Overcharging for legal duties does, which is why Jesus says this group will receive the greater condemnation. They have failed to show love for neighbour, the second great commandment.

Then Jesus sees rich people putting large sums into the temple treasury, possibly into chests around one of the courts of the temple. He doesn't criticise them, and I invite any rich people here this morning to give generously to St. John's. Some of you already do. But Jesus praises the widow for her sacrificial giving. She could give less – she has two coins – but no, she gives both. Such giving indicates true faith and is approved by God. There is a contrast with the rich for whom giving up a bit of wealth won't make much practical difference to their lives. Maybe a greater contrast is the inner attitude of the woman compared to the motives of the scribes discussed earlier. She's not trying to impress. It's true piety, not false piety.

So some important themes run through today's gospel:

- about the inner motives for what we do in religious or social practice;
- and about exploitation of the vulnerable.

Even though Jesus criticises the scribes, who are in a sense official representatives of the Jewish faith, he is bringing to the forefront a repeated theme of the Jewish scriptures. God's people have a duty to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. It has direct relevance to major issues in today's world:

- pressures on the poor;
- the duty of all nations to think globally about the effects of their practices;
- and the treatment of refugees.

Changing what we do may come at a necessary cost; changing attitudes is more difficult. The example of the widow speaks everyone, poor or rich, weak or powerful.