

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Nov. 10/11 – 2012

I Kings 17: 10-16; Hebrews 9; 24-28; Mark 12: 38-44

Introduction

There was a very stingy man who was separated from his wife and largely ignored her financial needs. Since she was having a difficult time getting along, she sued him for non-support. After the judge had heard all the evidence he said to the man, “I’m going to award your wife five hundred dollars a week.” The man said, “That’s very good of you, judge. I’ll try to send her a few bucks once a while myself.” In contrast to that man’s stinginess, both the *Old Testament reading* and the *Gospel* today show us widows who were very generous with all they had. What lessons do these readings have for us? There is a traditional lesson and also an alternative lesson.

The Traditional Lesson

Most commentators on the *Gospel* passage speak of it as praise for the widow. She gave all the money she had, and so was a remarkable example of generosity. Similarly the widow in the *first reading* shared all she possessed with the prophet, and also demonstrated extraordinary generosity. Both widows can be seen as images of Our Lord Jesus Christ who gave all for us, even his very life.

In this sense the *readings* show us how radical the Gospel message is. As followers of Christ we are called upon, not just to lead a respectable life, but to put everything at God’s disposal. We are to be, not half-hearted disciples, who make all sorts of compromises with the world, but people who find their fulfillment in who they are, sons and daughters of the Father. We are not to hoard our time and our money but to live generously, putting our trust in God and our hope in eternal life. This is a common interpretation of these passages and it tells us something important about what it means to be a Christian. There is also, however, another lesson here.

An Alternative Lesson

There are some commentators on this *Gospel* passage who argue that Jesus is not so much praising the widow as he is lamenting the kind of religious culture that encourages people like her to donate her entire livelihood to the Temple. Keep in mind that Jesus has just condemned those scribes who love titles, who seek the front seats in public gatherings, and who desire the praise of others. He accuses them of “devouring the houses of widows.” So in that first part of today’s *Gospel* passage he appears to be speaking out against the kind of religious leaders who encourage poor widows like this to donate even what they need to live on.

The point is not that Jesus disapproves of donating to the support of the Temple. It is rather that he insists that giving to the Church must not come ahead of a person’s genuine human needs. Remember that, earlier in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus defended his conduct when he healed sick people on the Sabbath. He did so on the grounds that human need comes ahead of Sabbath observance. Recall as well that in Chapter 7 he condemned those religious leaders who refused to support their needy parents on the grounds that they were giving the money to the Temple instead; he called this hypocrisy.

So today's *Gospel* reading shows us Jesus' concern for ordinary people and his desire that they be able to satisfy their basic needs in life. He rejects any sort of religion that ignores those needs or that leads us away from doing what we can to help people live a truly human life. Such religion dishonours the God who cares deeply about every person.

This *Gospel* passage also reminds us that, as a Church, we should not find ourselves "devouring the houses of widows." There is a responsibility to support the Church. However there is also a duty on our part as a Church-community to ask why we want that support. If we seek it to pay our legitimate expenses as a community, to support the preaching of the Gospel, and to have something on hand to assist those in need, then all well and good. However if we seek it so we can look rich in the world's eyes, so we can be thought strong and successful as a Church, then we are following the wisdom of the world rather than the Wisdom of God. This world values honours, money, influence, and regards them as the signs of a successful life. In every age the followers of Jesus are tempted, like the scribes, to buy into that view. We must not let that happen to us.

Finally, today's *Gospel* raises disturbing questions about the kind of witness we give to our world by our use of money. All of us need money. However it is our sacred calling, as a Church-community, and as individual Christians, to be a sign to others that we are only the temporary stewards of whatever money or goods we have. Our use of them should reflect the fact that the God who is the real owner of them is a generous Father, not an uncaring master.

Conclusion

One of the great Christian virtues is liberality, that is, an attitude of generosity in the way we use our time, our talent and our treasure. It is from the Latin word "*liber*", meaning "free". The idea is that if we are free with what we have, we will experience a great personal freedom ourselves. At the same time we must never give people the impression that God does not want them to have enough to meet their genuine human needs. If we did that, we would be insulting the generosity of God.