

11 November 2018

Whitsuntide 25

St Mark 12: 38 - 44

This morning's gospel lesson has long been a favourite of the believers in what I believe is the wicked and false heretical gospel of prosperity. They delight to point to the poor elderly woman who slowly makes her way up to the entrance of the Temple and puts two small copper coins into the collection basins. Now she has nothing left, and she has made herself totally dependent upon the mercy of God for anything to eat. Those two copper coins were seeds of faith that she had planted as she committed her survival to the Lord God.

Be like her! They will shout as they extort money from their audience promising the more than give the greater the blessings from God. It's seed money, faith offerings, sacrificial giving. The more someone contributes to this ministry, the more God will give them. And as for those who do nothing, well, certainly, that they have heard God's prophet speaking to them, they will suffer terrible calamities, financial disaster, and a long lingering illness for they and their children that will end in misery and death.

I have also seen many pre-written stewardship sermons sold by companies for a church's stewardship campaign that use this same passage. Look at the wealthy people, the writer says. They are just giving a small portion of their discretionary money, careful to make sure it will not impede their pleasures. And there is a humble woman, giving all of her resources. Look how Jesus condemns the wealthy and praises the poor.

It is a passage that works well for money raising, and with a bit of creativity it is a theme that any organization or group can convert for their own uses. But I truly believe it misuses the intent of Jesus because it is being taken from the wrong perspective. The first mistake we make is looking at the last portion of the events, the woman, as a model of virtue faith compared to everyone else. Let's stretch our imagination. What if she isn't a model of faith, but something far darker is happening to her?

I say this because St Mark was the first disciple to write his gospel, only some twenty or twenty five years after the Resurrection. Like many other early Christians he was convinced that Jesus was going to return any day. Compared to the other three gospels, Mark is far more focused on the end times, the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming. He saw the Temple as a place of worship that had been converted into big business, and the priests, scribes, and rabbis who served congregated at the Temple were far too self-serving. The Temple put itself over the people because, according to the words of Jesus that St Mark recorded, the leadership looked first to their own interests. It was big business, run like a modern corporation. It was ruthless, it was bullying because the faithful had been all but excluded. Maybe that wasn't intentional, but happened because of a lack of focus and thought on the people who came to worship. The result was that it separated people from God.

What ever the reasons, and we may never know, it was a terrible indictment. It is an indictment that has been used throughout the Christian era because so very often the church was closely aligned with an oppressive monarch and his government. In the middle ages, when the Peasant's revolt and then Wat Tyler's Revolt swept across parts of Europe, the first targets were churches and cathedrals. Well, in the case of Wat Tyler's Revolt, they burned the brothels in Southwark London because they were owned by the Bishop of London. Then they attacked the churches and cathedrals.

It wasn't because the rebels were atheists or enemies of Jesus. Rather, it is because they saw churches as repositories of great wealth that was never used to care for the people, and ruthless bullying of the lay people, often in the name of God. Undoubtedly you have read or seen the stage or film production of Les Miserables. Perhaps you remember

the scene where Jean Valjean steals some of the Bishop of Paris' silverware. He's caught, and the Bishop comes across as the good man when he snarls at Jean Valjean, "I told you to take the silver candlesticks, too." Tragically, it is complete fiction. One of the first men apprehended by the Paris Commune was the bishop, who was dragged out to the streets and brutally murdered. During the Bolshevik Revolution and the four year long Russian civil war, the same stories were repeated. The church and its leaders were considered to be the local oppressors working on behalf of the Czar.

As negative as all of this is, it is the frightening reality of what can happen when organized religion gets too callous and careless, and at the same time enters into an unholy marriage with abusive secular power.

We avoid that reality when we keep in mind that our faith and the practice of our faith must be tangible. In other words, we must practice what we affirm with our lips. That is the only way we have credibility, or what is often called today, currency.

I like that word 'currency' when it is used that way.

Pat and I read "Wired" magazine. It's quirky, but in a recent edition there was an article about crypto currency such as Bitcoins, and all of their electronically created imitators. The author wrote that Bitcoins exist only on the internet, and even though they have no tangible value they are imaginary. That is radically different from traditional money, whether it is the giant stone wheels of the Yak peoples of the south Pacific or the coins and bills in your pocket. It is all ether, and one good solar storm that destroys or damages the internet is the end of Bitcoins. Those who own the invisible Bitcoins keep them in equally invisible purses or caches. It's all ethereal.

He went on to explore social media such as FaceBook where people send electronic birthday greetings to others, or how people send a message to signal their agreement or disagreement with something another person has posted.

It's a forum, but an electronic card is not a substitute for writing a note and sending a card, or having a face to face dialogue. He points out that even bookstores are showing new signs of life because people want to hold a book in their hands, feel it, smell it, participate with its presence.

He believes the time will come when people will reject the imaginary, whether it is bitcoins or signalling a message. They will want something of substance, something they can hold in their hands.

I truly believe all of that applies to the practice of our relationship with God and our partnership with Jesus Christ. If the body of Christ is to be the genuine article, then it has to constantly look for very tangible ways.

That is what I see when I read this passage, and it is a frightening and horrible indictment. It happens when ever the church or any other institution or group, sacred or secular, falls into the trap of believing that the first responsibility of their organization is to protect the organization rather than serve others. And then the second trap where individuals within the group seek first to protect their position. We see it on an individual level when ever leaders neglect to serve and seek to be served, or serve themselves by accumulating vast wealth and power.

But when we begin looking at this passage starting with the indictment, then the response of the widow and her two copper coins takes on a very different meaning. Jesus had just said the rabbis wanted to have luxurious and long robes and be recognized as important men where ever they went. No doubt, after a while, they came to expect recognition and gifts as something to which they were entitled, even to the point of depriving the poorest and most vulnerable people of their resources.

Perhaps, with a sense of sorrow and resignation, as the woman walked up the steps and across the plaza and saw the magnificent Temple she was thinking, "Well, those bandits took everything else I had for my last years; they might as well take these two copper coins, as well." That idea turns the passage from one of praise to sorrow.

It is a reminder of what we are not to do, and I believe to the best of our efforts, we have redoubled our efforts to move in the right direction - in a Christ-like direction. We make ourselves vulnerable by sharing ourselves with others - just as Jesus did throughout His ministry.

Earlier this fall as we began pulling together everything from the CAT survey and the World Cafe, Dr Baker created a visual model for our parish. In a series of concentric circles we see the form of organization we will be using here for the future.

Not merely raising and spending money, but it surrounds the entire life of our church. Are we using all of our resources for the honour of God and service to others? Is our parish life together, formally or informally, good stewards? Facilities and grounds? Mission outreach? Ministry? And so on. The whole schematic emphasizes all segments of our parish work together to become, to the best of our ability, the people we know we are called to be.