

## ***Rich scribe versus poor widow***

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost—8 November 2015

*Mark 12:38-44, Ruth 3.1-5, 4.13-17.*

### **Introduction**

You've heard the latest joke about lawyers? ... Well I'm not going to tell it. I am not going to tell some scurrilous tale about such upstanding people but, reflecting on your own anticipation, you can get a sense of the power of Jesus' criticism of the scribes, the educated class. He was speaking specifically about the lawyers or legal experts of his day when he roundly criticised their behaviour.

Some scribes were part of that Jewish pressure group we know of as the Pharisees, whose aim was to purify Israel through intensified observance of the Jewish law. With the help of the scribes, they worked out their own tradition about the meaning and application of the law to daily life. They developed their own patterns of prayer and devotion. They had notions of what was in the best interests of Israel, what was the national hope. They had a political agenda.

But it is not their nationalism that Jesus has in his sights here.

### **Rich scribes.**

In his denunciation of the scribes, Jesus has them gobbling up widows' houses and displaying other forms of rapacious behaviour. The scribes, by their education and position, have access to those with influence, wealth and power. They then display this association in their dress and their demands for social status.

They love:

to walk about in long robes,  
the greetings in the market places,  
the first bench in the synagogues,  
and the first couch at dinners.

This a devastating caricature of persons who wish at every stage of social life to be endowed with status and privilege. Why? Because status and privilege were the most important commodities for the attainment of power in their world.

We are back to the world of power and its insidious influence. We have seen that power over others is forbidden among disciples. Some members of the scribal caste sought it no doubt for the buzz it brought. There is no "least" and "servant" in this mentality. So they become a walking morality tale about the values of the kingdom and the values of status and privilege.

Worse still, they then use their power to dispossess others. In this case they attack the most vulnerable, the widow who has no-one to defend her and the few assets that she may have. They are downright exploiters. And it is not as if they did not know. The vocation of Judaism was to protect the orphans and the widows. God inscribed it in the law and the prophets and the psalms and the sages. It was inescapable. The way they treated the vulnerable was the way God measured their spirituality. Pious noises were not enough.

Reflect on Psalm 94, one of the great hymns of the second Temple. Speaking of the wicked the worshippers sang: "They kill the widow and the stranger (refugee), they murder the

orphan.” (Ps 94.6). The wicked boast “The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob does perceive.” (Ps 94.7). And: “The Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage; for justice will return to the righteous ...” (Ps 94.14-15).

The spirituality of the psalm is at odds with their greedy behaviour. They want to be like their patrons and they take on their acquisitive values. Jesus undermines the authority of the scribes by linking them with that uncaring wealthy politically powerful that has no concern for the good of the people but rather would plunder them. Despite the good things they may do the kingdom passes them by because it is about mercy and justice, love of neighbours, least and servant.

That mentality and action had drawn the attention of the prophets and they read them in the synagogue lectionary. In the mid 720s or so Isaiah addresses those who: “...make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes to turn the needy from justice and to the poor of my people of their that widows may be your spoil and that you may make orphans prey!” (Isaiah 10.1-2)

And Zechariah facing the problem in the post exilic period c.520 BCE: “...Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan the alien or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.” (Zechariah 7.9-10).

Worse—in Jesus’ day the scribes cover it all up with piety and spirituality. “Long prayers” is shorthand for the public display of piety. Prayer is meant to be a form of self disclosure in the presence of the God who gives himself for all in justice and mercy, who, though rich, becomes poor. Here prayer is a cover, a smokescreen for the most contemptible and corrupt behaviour imaginable.

Remember that this is a warning to the church, the people of God the inheritors of the kingdom. Human nature has a way of corrupting the most sacred and turning it to the ends of greed and self aggrandisement. People acting out their inadequacy seek power, seek to impress and it is little surprise that that the abuse becomes concrete. Mark has already warned us in verses 9-10 about power and has presented us with images of a child, Bartimaeus sitting on the sidelines, a widow, and others to keep our attention on the main game.

We are too easily distracted.

### **Poor widow**

The link word for these two passages is “widow”. Mark likes doing that sort of thing to help us remember but also to draw out ideas by the conjunction of seemingly unconnected stories.

Jesus sits and scrutinizes the behaviour of those who come. He scrutinizes with the eye of the God of the psalms and the prophets.

The setting was either where thirteen trumpet-shaped chests were placed around the walls of the Court of the Women in which the people threw their offerings or the Treasury itself, where donors had to declare the amount of their gift to the priest in charge and the purpose for which it was intended, everything being audible and visible to the onlooker. Giving became a matter of power, status and privilege.

In contrast to the scribes, the story of the widow’s offering is all the more powerful. From the exploited widows, abused by religious power people, we turn to one particular widow offering all she has to God’s house. She puts in a couple of dollars. It is her whole life.

This woman is a hero. The scribes grab and exploit in their spiritual poverty; she in her poverty has a wealth of generosity. She is a type of Jesus himself: a self-giving person.

A pathetic woman upstages the parading men, whether they be rich or of the scribal class. She is totally open to God, she is vulnerable, she is prepared for costly self giving. Jesus approves the spirit of self-sacrificing generosity, a foreshadowing of his own journey to the cross. The spirit of the kingdom is the spirit that gives everything to God, that trusts God completely, that depends on him completely, and that gives itself with unstinting generosity to others.

Jesus does not approve of poverty or the conditions that bring it about. One way of reading this story is that once again religion has robbed her. The temple has robbed this woman of her very means of livelihood. Like the scribal class it no longer protects the widows, but exploits them and all the vulnerable. In disgust Jesus turns his back on the Temple (13:1) and this for the final time. He would not return. In forty years the temple would be gone.

### **Concluding thoughts:**

We are near the end of Mark's journey through the life of Jesus. These little stories sum up so much of what it has all been about. Great things happen among the weak, the vulnerable. One of the contrasts here is the hollowness of public politics and the way God works in domesticity, in the ordinary. We see it in Ruth, where from within all the family issues of property, sex, hopelessness, God progresses the kingdom. A Moabite is the instrument of Israel's redemption. The despised outsider who could not qualify as a citizen becomes the channel of grace. So also in Ps. 127.

The widow is hero. She too could be the channel of grace and redemption to the church and the world. Generosity, loyalty, faithfulness, openness to the stranger, the care of the vulnerable, test the church and the society.

On the other side, power mongering status seeking and false piety of a secular or religious nature create a fog in which the rapacious may hide. We need continually to test ourselves against God's standard depicted here. Our political and religious leaders need continual scrutiny. We need a spirituality, not to cater for the selfish interests of post-moderns, but a spirituality that will take as its hero a widow, a child, or a prostitute who will pour oil on Jesus.