

Joining the Silent Revolution

Sermon for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 7 November 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

1 Kings 17: 8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9: 19-28; Mark 12: 38-44

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Pru Goward recently stirred things up with an opinion piece in the *Fin Review* condemning the underclass for their bad habits, as if their poverty was a moral failing. In some cases, it may be, at least in part. But, then, the Bible regularly describes extreme wealth as a moral failing. Today in our readings, we find a very different approach to poverty and vulnerability from the one Pru Goward might expect to find. Five things strike me about today's gospel in the context of our other readings—so ready, set, go ... !

First, our 1 Kings reading and our psalm remind us about how things look from God's perspective as the overseer of history. In 1 Kings, with its story of Elijah and that starving widowed mother, God is presented as in charge throughout. It's Yahweh, not Baal the pagan deity, who's presented as in charge of the weather, for instance, and through the prophet God shows compassion on those who are caught up in this struggle. Our psalm today leaves no doubt about God's priorities when it comes to compassion, and the confidence we can have in this.

But, and here's my second point, it's a compassion and a solidarity that's plainly missing from those who should know better, from those who claim the high ground and then sneer down from it. In our Gospel today, the Scribes—official interpreters of the law—are openly condemned by Jesus for devouring widow's houses, all the while enjoying the public show of being fine fellows and oh so godly. Likewise, the rich are ladling it into the poor box at the temple as the rich often do, highly visible at charity galas and the like, while the spirit of true charity, marked by compassion and solidarity, is completely absent. So, Jesus turns on those who profit from the system, those with their snouts in the trough, those forgetting who and what the system's for—which is the praise and honour of a just and compassionate God, and the wellbeing of brothers and sisters among God's beloved people.

Notice instead how Jesus *sees* this poor widow and makes her an example. The poor are widely regarded as beneath notice—who'd expect to learn something from them, let alone be instructed and edified? Not Pru Goward, not those who hold black Americans, or indigenous Australians, or asylum seekers in secret contempt, and certainly not the scribes in our Gospel today who find themselves in Jesus' sights. "Do you think they're evading responsibility, Jesus?" "I don't think, I know!"

My third point, then, is that Jesus sees someone who others don't see, and draws a lesson from someone who might otherwise attract contempt. But this is how things are with Jesus—God with us. And so many Christians have discovered this to be true. Missionaries and workers among the poor of many lands regularly learn lessons of faith, trust and generosity from people without the resources to secure their own lives and futures. Solidarity with those who have little more than faith and community in the developing world regularly renews the faith of first-world Christians. Sathi Clarke, who preached here a couple of years back, is a priest in the Church of South India. His father the bishop discovered this solidarity in poor rural areas working among social and religious outcasts. Sathi followed in his father's footsteps holding bible studies with the homeless in Washington DC, where he taught at a seminary, and realising that he had as much to learn as he had to teach. Any wise pastor discovers this in parish ministry, too, by getting alongside all sorts of ordinary people. Our Anglicare workers likewise, working at the coalface of social disadvantage, have many positive stories like this to tell.

My fourth point today is that just because the system is being gamed and our public life is rife with dishonesty, and despite often lacklustre leadership from the Churches, this doesn't mean that we should just give up trying. The widow in our gospel today was praised for doing what she could under present conditions, not despising the system and not rushing to tear it down like the Zealots. This struck me in Poland years ago seeing bent old ladies reaching up with difficulty to push plastic bottles into the high slots of recycling bins, just like in Krzysztof Kieslowski's memorable "Three Colours" trilogy of films—a symbol for this great filmmaker of ordinary people doing their best under difficult conditions. So too this widow, whose compassionate solidarity with the poor and whose trust in God actually constituted a profound protest in its own right. Her act was a sign of trust that God and God's compassionate solidarity are the fundamental reality of things despite all appearances.

My fifth and final point is to say just why we can trust God in these ways despite much evidence that the world and its leaders and its über rich think and act differently. The clue is in our Hebrews reading today, as ever in our Eucharist. The old order is being fulfilled and overtaken in Jesus Christ. The old rituals and norms and habits are being renovated and aerated and translated by Jesus into new rituals and norms and habits, which is the heart of Christianity's good news—that nothing remains the same thanks to Jesus, nothing. So rather than smug detachment, looking out for number one, and rather than angry zealotry intent of blowing up and tearing down, we learn faith, perseverance and solidarity from that widow. And this is the logic of the Eucharist; this is joining the silent revolution.

The Lord be with you ...