

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading: (1 Kings 17.10-16)

Elijah and the Widow

This story about Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is chosen to pair with the story in today's gospel about the generosity of the widow in the Temple. It is also, of course, about a widow's generosity, but this story is more about her trust and obedience to the command of the prophet. In a way, trust in the Lord is the subtext of all generosity: we trust that the need presented to us is presented to us by the Lord, a request for our help. We trust that God, our Father, knows what he is doing. Realizing that we are no more than stewards of God's good things, we respond to the need which God presents.

This story also has something special about it, for this widow in the territory of Sidon is mentioned in the manifesto speech that Jesus makes in Luke's gospel in the synagogue of Nazareth: his mission is not confined to Israel any more than that of the prophets was. The gentiles, too, are the children of God, the object of his loving care, and are to be saved no less than the Jews. In Jesus' mission, the gentiles also form part of the Chosen People of God.

Question:

What recent incident really called for your trust in God?

Second reading: (Hebrews 9.24-28)

Christ's Sacrifice Once and for All

Addressed to Jewish priests converted to Christianity, this Letter to the Hebrews seeks to show them that the sacrifices they had formerly valued so much were only a shadow of the reality in Christ. There is no time in heaven! Those sacrifices were of their nature temporary and unsatisfying; Christ's is of its nature eternal and all sufficient. The image of Christ, permanently presenting his sacrifice and his blood before the throne of God is ultimately reassuring. It signifies the permanent and unbreakable union of humanity to God, welded by the obedience of Jesus on the Cross.

Although the language is largely similar, the sacrifices of the Bible are not to be thought of in the same way as pagan and Greek sacrifices. They are not appeasing an angry god, but are celebrating unity with God. They are shared meals, and in the great annual sacrifice of the Day of Reconciliation, blood is sprinkled on people and altar to signify the renewed union with God. Especially reassuring is the mention of Christ's blood, for blood is the symbol of life. Christ's blood, given to us, is the sign and sacrament of the gift of divine life, offered to us, if only we will accept it.

Question:

Why was Jesus' self-offering so valuable to God?

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Gospel:

Mark 12.38-44)

The Widow's Offering

We are presented with a contrast between the dignitaries of the Temple, parading in their splendour, and the least of the least. These little coins are called lepta, meaning 'light', hardly more than shavings of copper, hardly worth picking up. Yet the value of a gift depends not on its absolute worth, but in the love with which it is given. The value of a birthday present depends on the love it expresses, and the care that has gone into choosing or making it.

One can imagine the widow debating with herself: could she survive without these two little coins, if she made this supreme gift to the Lord. What would she have to go without? As with the Sidonian widow in the first reading, this paltry gift is a rich expression of her trust in divine love and care, of her wanting to do something for the Lord. The little gift would go unnoticed among the riches of that exquisite and lavish building, for its splendour was the wonder of the eastern Mediterranean, but it is a heartfelt expression of her love.

Just so with our prayer of praise: it does no good to God, but is for us the joyful outpouring of our love and wonder.

Question:

What makes a gift really valuable?
