

### **Thirty Second Sunday in Ordinary time**

We are gathering to celebrate the Eucharist one hundred years after the end of the First World War. We are commemorating the signing of the Armistice that signaled the end of a terrible conflict that cost the lives of countless people. We gather with mixed emotions. We wish to honour all those who gave their lives in that war. We are remembering in a special way ten servicemen who were part of our parish that we know died. Our emotions are mixed because we are saddened that their young lives were cut short. We are deeply saddened that that this was not the war to end all wars and that our world is still torn apart by hatred and conflict. In some ways what we are commemorating today is reflected in today's gospel where there is a mixture of good and evil.

We hear Jesus warning his hearers, "Beware of the scribes who like to walk about in long robes." The Scribes in many ways were good people who were especially skilled in knowing the detail of the Mosaic Law. They knew how God wanted his people to live well in relation with him and with each other. But knowing that did not automatically make them humble or holy.

It seemed that the Scribes loved to be noticed especially by those who needed them. They offered to be of service to widows who had nobody to bat for them. But they made the runs for themselves. "These are the men who

swallow the property of widows, while making a show of lengthy prayers. The more severe will be the sentence they receive."

How do we feel when we hear that? Do we make a show of the things that we do for others? Are we thinking about ourselves or the people we are serving? I think all of us like to be noticed for the good that we do. And sometimes we get hurt by people who seem to take for granted the effort that we make to care for them. But ultimately the only one who needs to notice the good that we do is the One who moves us to do it.

Jesus certainly didn't miss what was happening when people were making their offerings to help run the temple. A Jewish writer of the time tells us that there were thirteen trumpet shaped chests in the sanctuary each one labelled for its purpose. When people threw their coins into these trumpet shaped collection plates it made quite a noise, thus bringing attention to the gift and the giver. Some people were rich enough to make a lot of noise. But Jesus noticed that there was a poor widow there who would have wished that she could have wrapped her two small coins in tissue paper so that nobody would notice her. She gave to the treasury all that she had to live on.

Surely this was a great act of sacrifice but what Jesus really thought about what was happening here is not immediately clear. He would have deeply admired her profound trust in God. It is the sort of trust that we read about in today's first reading. The widow, who was asked by Elijah to make the last of her food into a meal for him, could only do that if she believed that what he said to her was true. "For thus the Lord speaks, the God of Israel: 'Jar of meal shall not be spent, jug of oil shall not be emptied, before the day when the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.'"

Those who fought in the First World War trusted that what they were doing was for the good of others. Often, they were just following orders, but at times their prayer must have been to have the courage to be ready to give up their lives so that others would live in freedom.

How often have we prayed to God to give us the strength to be there for others? Perhaps it is when we are feeling weak and helpless ourselves that we are called to be the strength for others. It is then that we rely upon God's strength working through us. Sometimes we give away more than is prudent, not knowing if and when we will get it back. Sometimes we set out to do something small for someone and then discover that we have a much bigger gift to give than we thought we had. As Paul

reminds us, God can do much more in and through us than we can imagine.

The example of the widow in the gospel can be an inspiration for us all. But some would say that what Jesus saw the widow do was a cause of lament for him. Jesus would have been saddened by seeing this generous woman manipulated into giving away the very little that she had to live on. She would have felt obliged to give what she could not afford to give. And Jesus would have seen the temple authorities, among them those scribes whom he had so roundly criticised, as the ones who had taken advantage of her generosity. You could say that she was a victim of religious exploitation.

If we accept that as a possible reading of today's gospel then we might well pray a prayer of lament for all those who were caught up in the wars of the past, and those who are affected by the conflicts that are going on now. In every war those in authority take advantage of the goodness and the generosity of those who serve. Jesus brings our attention to the abuse of religious authority in his time and to the generous self-giving of this poor widow. This was the last word of instruction to his disciples. He was about to submit himself to that religious authority and to the authority of the state and give his life for us. He was ready to become a slave so that we could be truly free.