

Thirty Second Sunday in Ordinary time

I celebrated Mass on Thursday morning for the receptions to year three children at St. Francis de Sales. We celebrated the Mass in the Receptions' learning Space. In their space they were the experts and I was the learner. Robbie sat next to me and told me the names of the children in his reception class as they took their places on the floor. Robbie asked me why the table was there with a cushion behind it. I told him we were about to have a meal and that we would sit around that table as Jesus and his friends did on the night before he died and do what Jesus did then. Robbie didn't pretend to understand what I had said. He just told me that he eats at a table at home.

I'm sure that Jesus would have loved the opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist with a group of wide-eyed Reception children with all their questions and simplicity. But so often Jesus was confronted by people who only questioned him to try to catch him out and simplicity was not one of their virtues. Today 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 but it was so often for their own advantage. "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. Some people were rich enough to make a large offering to the temple. But Jesus noticed that there was a poor widow there who had only a very small amount to give, two small coins. 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.'"

How often have we prayed to God to have that kind of faith and trust in God and 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 for whom the practice of religion is a burden. Jesus would want us to be so filled with faith in God that what we do to express our faith would be a joy for us. 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 to joyfully love him and one another with all our hearts.