

Two widows.

Our lectionary compilers today bring us the stories of two widows: One from the first book of Kings, the other from the gospel of Mark. The general thought is that these two stories are separated by about nine hundred years, but in our minds, we often think of them as being in 'bible time'. And while there had been a lot of changes between three thousand and two thousand years ago, a lot of things were the same.

And one of the things that had stayed the same was the position of widows in society. In a generally poor society, in the time long before life insurance and superannuation and pensions, widows were in a terrible position. Socially, and especially financially.

In both the stories we have today, we find widows giving out of what little they had.

In the lead up to today's reading from 1 Kings, we learn that it was the time of King Ahab – who, the writer tells us “did more to provoke the Lord [...] to anger, that did all the kings of Israel before him” (16:33), and as a result of Ahab turning away from him, God sent a drought on the land.

God took care of his servant Elijah, and sent him to a brook in a ravine, where the ravens brought him bread and meat, and he was able to drink from the brook.

But the verse immediately before today's reading says “Some time later, the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land” (17:7).

Again though, God took care of Elijah, and, as we heard, Elijah was sent to Zarephath of Sidon, where a widow would supply him with food. Not a ruler, not an official, not even a tradesman, but a widow.

And so, Elijah went there and met a widow picking up sticks for her final meal. Can you imagine that? Looking in the cupboard and seeing only enough food for you and your family for one meal. And then going out and gathering some sticks so you can cook for the last time.

We are so richly blessed, living in some of the wealthiest suburbs in the wealthiest city of one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Our country produces far more food than we consume. And few of us will have ever wondered where our next meal is coming from.

But upon meeting Elijah, the widow immediately looked to how she could help him. “Bring me some water...” Elijah asked. Yes, of course. And as she was getting him water, he asked for something more “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

Just think about it: She was about to prepare all she had for a last meal for herself and her son, and this stranger has asked for it.

She told him the situation.

Elijah said to her “Don’t be afraid.” Go ahead, do what you were going to do, but share what you have with me, because the Lord your God will ensure that the flour is not used up, and the jug of oil won’t run dry.

And she trusted God, and she did as Elijah asked, and sure enough, there was food for Elijah, the woman and her family.

What a story of faithfulness! What a story of God’s provision in response to her willingness to share what little she had!

I wonder how we would go if we were asked to share our last meal. Or our last dollar. Or I wonder if we might be a bit more inclined to encourage others to give up their last meal or their last dollar.

Which brings us to the story of the second widow today.

We heard that Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. The treasury itself wasn’t a separate building, it’s the part of the temple where people put in their offerings, and as Jesus sat there, he and the disciples watched the crowd coming and going and putting money in.

It was the practice to toss your offering in. It’s generally thought this was a large metal urn that would clang as you tossed your coins in. It was really obvious how much you put in. We heard that Jesus saw many rich people putting in large sums.

But then a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins. It wouldn’t have clanged – if it made any sound, it would have been a faint ‘tink’.

Her offering would have made no difference to the treasury. The temple was a big business, and a couple of copper coins, here and there wouldn’t have made a difference. It wouldn’t have been worth counting.

Verse 43 “Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.” And no doubt they would have thought back to the story of Elijah and widow and thought that she was following the example of the earlier widow – giving the last of what she had.

And yes, there are these similarities, and no doubt that’s why our lectionary compilers have chosen to have these two readings today. While the generosity of both these women is an example to us, we need to see the later story in context.

Because the widow’s offering at the temple served as an opportunity for Jesus to teach his disciples, and to really to emphasise what he’d been telling them only just before.

Because Jesus had said to them, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets.”

(12:38-49)

At one level, that's all okay: There's nothing wrong with being greeted with respect, or having the best seats.

But the implication is that the teachers of the law were expecting these things because of their office. They thought because they had an important job, that people needed to treat them differently – better – than they treated others.

And of course, the further implication is that they didn't show similar respect to others.

In fact, Jesus is scathing of them: "They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers."

"They devour widows houses" - they consume all the widows have – they squeeze everything that they can get out of others. And they wouldn't care that a widow no longer has anywhere to live.

And then they pray long prayers to boost their own appearance. I can imagine a prayer something like "O Lord, thank you that this woman has given up her home so that my robes can better reflect your glory"

Somewhat darkly, Jesus added "These men will be punished most severely." Or in other translations "They will receive the greater condemnation" (NRSV). Or maybe we could translate that to "They think they're something special? Well, just you wait". Or maybe even "They'll get theirs".

He's showing the disciples what was wrong with the system. How a good principle – that the widow of Elijah's time had shared what she had, had been exploited by the teachers of the law.

The widow had put in everything, but she shouldn't have had to. She shouldn't have been expected to.

The widow of Elijah's time had shared all she had, not given it all up.

Go back to Deuteronomy 10 – For the Lord your god...is mighty and awesome ..., he executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves strangers, providing them food and clothing.

God wants justice for the widow and all widows and orphans and strangers.

Jesus reminds us in Mark 12, of the most important commandment: to love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and that the second is to love your neighbour as yourself.

Throughout church history, this story of the widow putting her last coins in the temple treasury has been held up as an example of how we should be giving. Give generously! We say. Give until it hurts! We say.

But I don't think that's the right lesson to take from the stories of the two widows.

Throughout the Old Testament, there is a theme of God caring for the widow, and the orphan, and the strangers and the poor. Those themes are part of Jesus' own ministry, and continue into the book of Acts and the New Testament teachings.

The widow didn't need to give to the temple. Instead, the temple should have been giving to the woman. Not necessarily in terms of money, but in terms of love. In relieving from her the burden of having to contribute to the temple coffers. In providing her with fellowship and friendship – and food and shelter if she was in need.

By contrast to what the widow gave, the others that Jesus had seen putting money in the treasury had contributed out of their abundance. They could afford it. And that was a good thing.

And it still is a good thing. So, church councillors, you don't need to worry that I'm telling people they don't need to put offertory in. Contributing to the church is a great thing to do, and if we have in abundance, then we should contribute out of that abundance.

It shouldn't hurt to give. If it hurts or if we resent it, we're probably giving out of duty or obligation or possibly in expectation that we're buying something.

As we read in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we shouldn't be giving reluctantly or under compulsion because God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor 9:7). We should be giving freely, abundantly and joyfully.

But of course, we need to be aware of those among us who are like the widow, who rather than giving all they have to the church, need the church's love and support in their lives. It's not just giving money that can be the issue, but giving time and energy too. We can easily come to rely on the efforts of those who are already giving more than is really fair.

As we contemplate today's readings, and what they might mean for us today, we need to remember that we are coming very close to the end of Mark's gospel. In the chapter after next Jesus is arrested and his death isn't far away.

I mention that particularly, because as we think of what we give to the church, or what we give to our neighbours, we need to remember that we give because Jesus first gave for us.

And Jesus has given up so much for us.

He gave up the glories of heaven, to become of us.

He gave up his life, to die for us.

And he gives us the gift of eternal life.

The teachers of the law, those self-important officials of Jesus' time, regarded the widow at the treasury in the same way they regarded the two small coins she tossed into the coffers. Insignificant.

It's Remembrance Day tomorrow, and we think of the hundreds of thousands who died in World War One, we remember the individuals, so often thought of as expendable or insignificant, who were ordered into battle by others. Who gave all they had for their king and country.

We need to remember that each one who died was significant to others. To parents, to wives, to children. People who loved them and cared for them. People to whom they were significant.

And so it was for that widow at the treasury.

She was significant to Jesus. He saw that she gave all she could, even though that was all she had.

And that's a comforting thought, I think: Even if we feel insignificant, even if others think that we're insignificant. We are significant to Jesus.

Jesus who loves us. Jesus who died for us. And Jesus who calls all of us to follow him.

Amen.