

## **Two coins.**

When I was made redundant from MLA, after nineteen years there, I had a bit of time on my hands, and one of the things I did was tidy my bedside drawers. For years, I'd been coming home from work and emptying out coins from my pockets onto my bedside table. And when I was getting dressed the next day, I'd pick up the useful coins and put them into my pocket for that day. I wouldn't typically pick up all the coins though, and from time to time I'd tidy my bedside table by opening the top drawer and sweeping the coins in.

So, one day I sat down on the floor, pulled the top drawer out and sorted out the coins, put them into little bags, and pretty much filled a two-litre ice cream container. Off I went to the bank and exchanged them for practical money. And then I went and had a haircut, and after paying for that, I had enough left for about half a cup of coffee.

I had a staggering amount of five cent pieces, but they added up to not very much. Now, I remember when 5 cents was a reasonable amount of money. When I started school, you could buy a Sunny Boy ice bock for 5 cents. And if you chose wisely at the corner shop, you could buy as many as ten lollies for five cents.

But that was the early seventies, and we've had some inflation since.

The 1c and 2c coins are long gone, but the five cent coin remains. If you want to challenge yourself this week, try heading to the shops with a single 5 cent coin, and see if you can spend it.

These days the 5 cent coin's major uses are giving change... and filling up bedside drawers.

Five cent coins are generally not worth worrying about. In fact, much of the time, they're a hassle.

If we dropped one on the street, many of us wouldn't bother to stop to pick it up.

Many of us would sooner tap a card than worry about what we do with change. Some of us will diligently put our 5c coins in a money box for charity. And a few of us will just let them accumulate.

More than twenty years ago I taught Sunday School, and even then, some parents were using the Sunday School offertory as a way to get rid of their 5

cent pieces. I had to count it, and I'd have to hand it to someone else, who had to count it, and pass it on to the person doing the banking, who'd have to verify it, and take it to the bank – where the teller would count these piles of 5c pieces.

Really, our time is too important to worry about 5 cent pieces. We are too important to worry about 5 cent pieces. And 10 cent pieces. In fact probably any silver coin.

We're just too important. Or at least we think we're just too important.

The scribes and the pharisees of Jesus' time thought they were important too. And they liked people to know how important they were. Hopefully, we're not like that, although we might slip from time to time.

Jesus said, "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, which is spelled out a bit more in the parallel passage in Matthew's gospel, is that the scribes 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.

Even when they weren't doing their official duties, they still expected special treatment. In the marketplace they wanted people to greet them with special respect – to call them 'Rabbi'.

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 don't care that the 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 vestments can better reflect your glory”. (But much longer).

Somewhat darkly, Jesus adds “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 wait”. Or maybe even “They’ll get theirs”.

We read that then 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 he sat there, he watched the crowd coming and going and putting money in.

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

But then a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins. The first century equivalent of a 5 cent piece. 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, a penny, 5 cents here and there wouldn’t have made a difference. It wouldn’t have been worth counting.

This was an opportunity for Jesus to teach his disciples, really to expound what he’s just told them about the teachers of the law and their self importance.

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.”

He’s showing the disciples what is wrong with the system. The others might have put in more cash, but this widow had put in everything she had – all she had to live on, as he says in verse 44.

She has put in everything, but she shouldn’t have had to. She shouldn’t have been expected to. She shouldn’t have been asked to. Possibly she shouldn’t even have been allowed to.

This is the graphic illustration of the teachers of the law devouring widows houses. The system, Jesus says, is wrong. This is not how the temple should be working. It is not how God intended the system to work.

Go back to Deuteronomy 10 – For the Lord your god...is mighty and awesome, is not partial and takes no bribe, 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. This widow throwing all she has into the treasury is not just.

Go back to earlier in Mark 12, which we looked at last week, where the teacher of the law asked Jesus what the most important commandment. And Jesus told him it's to love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and that the second is to love your neighbour as yourself.

And that particular teacher of the law agreed ““You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Throughout church history, this story has frequently 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 is the lesson that Jesus is teaching here. Particularly when we take today's reading as a whole, we can see it as Jesus sharing his sorrow and despair – his anger even – with the religious hierarchy and for that matter, with the nation of Israel as a whole.

Throughout the Old Testament, there is a theme of God caring for the widow, and the orphan, and the strangers and the poor.

If loving our neighbours is really more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices as the scribe said, why on earth was the temple taking the widow's money so it could make more burnt offerings and sacrifices, rather than loving her?

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 cash, 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. Rather than devouring her house, the system should have been making sure she had one.

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 this passage, and what it might mean for us here in St Ives at this time, 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.

And this week, as we approach Remembrance Day, 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, the soldiers who were the five cent pieces of geopolitics, 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, even if we are the five cent pieces of the world. We are significant to Jesus.

Amen.