

Homily for the 32nd Sunday, Nov. 8, 2009

I. Few gospel stories, either of Jesus' compassion or his miraculous cures, even of his suffering on the cross, affect me more than this story of the poor widow who puts her last couple of coins into the temple treasury. How could she do this?

First, she evidently believed that all she had was from God, and she wanted to give it all back to God. In short, God was all that mattered in her life. Secondly, God was her only hope. Widows in the ancient world had an extremely difficult row to hoe. Perhaps, she knew the story of the widow's generosity to Elijah, which was rewarded by flour and oil for a year. In any case, Jesus praised her for giving her all.

In that sense she is like Jesus himself, who, responding to God's call, gave up his livelihood as a carpenter for the uncertainty of an itinerant preacher living on alms. She is like Saints Peter and Andrew, John and James, who left their boats and nets (their livelihood as fishermen) to follow this charismatic preacher. She is like Matthew, who gave up a secure living as a customs officer, to follow Jesus. She is like Abraham her father in faith, who left family and gods to follow His unknown God into an absolutely uncertain future based on unlikely promises. She is like thousands of Christian saints who have left everything to find all their riches in Christ.

And these are not just ancient saints. I know of a woman in Pennsylvania in the 1950s whose husband died when she was pregnant with her 13th child. She was a bright person, but illiterate. Her only employment was as a housecleaner during the day and an office cleaner at night. Each Sunday this woman put \$50, 10% of her weekly income, into the Church collection basket. She was convinced of two things: it was God's money which she was giving back, and that God would take care of her. All thirteen of her children got college degrees. These are the blessed ones. Their generosity earned them the blessedness of personal union with God.

As I am saying all of this, I wonder what emotions arise in your hearts: Are you filled with exhilaration that this widow is so generous? Are you filled with a desire to do the same? If so, you are close to the Reign of God. If, on the other hand, you feel fear at the risk she takes, or a sense of resentment that you might even be asked to do the same, you might be far from the Reign of God. For the essence of the Reign of God is this absolute desire to give back to God in Himself and in His people, the treasures we have received from Him. The depth of this desire is the measure of your success as a human being.

II. The widow assumed that the temple treasury was used for God's purposes. But we here on Education Sunday of our Stewardship drive perhaps need to ask whether the money you give the parish treasury is actually going to God's purposes. That is why we give you a financial statement in October, so that you can judge for yourself whether we are good stewards of your resources. That is why the president of the Finance Council addresses you, and that is exactly the question I have addressed in my pastor's column in today's bulletin.

Except for the cost of beautifying our cemetery, there are no new costs in our budget. We need an increase of 2% simply to cover unavoidable rises in fixed costs. Of course I recognize that in a time of layoffs and catastrophic medical costs a few of our families cannot give what they gave last year. Some will be making a sacrifice to give what they gave last year. Some can squeeze out the 25 increase. But some of you can compensate for other who are hit hard, and perhaps can give 3%, even a 5% increase.

My salary was frozen this year, but I figured I could manage a 2% increase. But as I prayed over this gospel, I realized I could give a 4% increase. Then, the more I gazed at this widow, I realized that, by the grace of God, I have a salary this year, and pretty strong job security, and so I *could* give a 6% increase. I arrived at that figure not by looking at my income and my expenses, but by looking at the example of this poor widow. If you keep your eyes on her, and on Jesus, and the saints, you will be able to give all that you can.

Giving more is certainly a risk. But relying on God is not as great a risk as relying on the stock market, or on the good will of your CEO or employer. God is faithful. In all your worries, it is helpful to reflect on the widow in the first reading, who gave her last cup of flour and her last measure of oil for the prophet of God. And for the rest of the year her flour can and her oil jug did not run out. Neither will yours. Don't trust me; trust God, who is never outdone in generosity.

God is the good news.