

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Nov. 7/8, 2009

Introduction

Pete and Joe were tightwads. At an air show they really wanted to go up for a ride in a small plane but they didn't want to spend that much money. The pilot overheard them and said: "I'll take you up. If you don't say a word during the flight, it's free. However if you cry out or holler, it will cost you forty dollars." They agreed. The pilot took them up and tried dives, rolls, all sorts of scary tricks, but there was not a word from his passengers. When he landed he said: "I congratulate you on staying quiet. The trip is free." Pete said, "Well, I was tempted to holler when Joe fell out, but forty dollars is forty dollars."

We get a very different picture in today's readings. Both the *Old Testament reading* and the *Gospel* feature widows who were very generous with all they had. What lessons do these *readings* have for us? There is a traditional lesson and also a deeper one.

The Traditional Lesson

Most commentators on this *Gospel* passage tend to speak of it as praise for the widow. She gave all the money she had, and so was a remarkable example of generosity. Similarly the widow in the *first reading* shared all she possessed with the prophet, and also demonstrated extraordinary generosity. Both widows can be seen as images of Our Lord Jesus Christ who gave all for us, even his very life.

In this sense the *readings* show us how *radical* the Gospel message is. As followers of Christ we are called upon, not just to lead what might be called a respectable life, but to give everything to God. We are to be, not half-hearted disciples, who make all sorts of compromises with the world, but people who find their fulfillment, not in what they *have*, but in what they *are*. Instead of hoarding our time and our money, we are called to live generously, putting our trust in God and our faith in eternal life. This is a common interpretation of these passages and it tells us something very important about what it means to be a Christian. There is also, however, another and even more radical lesson here.

A Deeper Lesson

There are some commentators on this *Gospel* passage who argue, quite convincingly in my opinion, that Jesus is not so much praising the widow as he is lamenting the kind of religious culture that encourages people like her to donate her entire livelihood to the Temple. Keep in mind that Jesus has just condemned those scribes who love titles, who seek the front seats in public gatherings, and who desire the praise of others. He accuses them of "devouring the houses of widows." So in that first part of today's *Gospel* passage he appears to be speaking out against the kind of religious leaders who encourage poor widows like this to donate even what they need to live on.

The point is not that Jesus disapproves of donating to the support of the Temple. It is rather that he insists giving to the Church must not come ahead of a person's genuine human needs. We must keep our priorities straight. Remember how, earlier in Mark's Gospel, Jesus defended his conduct when he healed sick people on the Sabbath. He did so on the grounds that human need comes ahead of Sabbath observance. Recall as well that in Chapter 7 he condemned those religious leaders who refused to support their needy parents on the grounds that they were giving the money to the Temple instead; he called this hypocrisy.

So today's *Gospel* reading appears to be emphasizing Jesus' genuine concern about ordinary people and his desire that they be able to satisfy their most basic needs in life. He rejects any sort of religion that ignores those needs. He insists that any kind of religious practice that leads us away from doing all we can to help people live a genuinely human life is false. Such religion dishonours the God who cares deeply about every single person.

This *Gospel* passage also reminds us that, as a Church, we should not find ourselves "devouring the houses of widows." There is a responsibility to support the Church. However there is also a duty on our part as a Church-community to ask why we want that support. If we seek it to pay our legitimate expenses, to support the preaching of the Gospel, and to have something on hand to assist those in need, then all well and good. However if we seek it so we can look rich in the world's eyes, so we can be thought strong and successful as a Church, then we are following the wisdom of the world rather than the Wisdom of God. This world treasures honours, money, influence, and regards them as the signs of a successful life. In every age the followers of Jesus are tempted, like the scribes, to buy into that view. We must not let that happen to us.

Finally, today's *Gospel* raises disturbing questions about the kind of witness we give to our world. All of us need money and we sometimes have to occupy positions of authority. However it is our sacred calling, as a Church-community, and as individual Christians, to be a public sign that the God we serve is the ultimate owner of any money or goods of which we happen to be the temporary stewards, and that this God is a generous Father, not a miser or an uncaring master. We give that witness by the way we use money and authority, and especially by the way we care about the needs of others.

Conclusion

One of the great Christian virtues is *liberality*, that is, an attitude of generosity in the way we use our time, our talent and our treasure. It is from the Latin word "*liber*", meaning "free". The idea is that if we are free with what we have, we will experience a great personal freedom ourselves. At the same time we must never give other people the impression that God does not want them to have enough to meet their genuine human needs. If we did that, we would be insulting the generosity of God.