

Trinity Sunday 12th June 2022

Focussing on God's generosity to us and our response

A sermon by Revd. Nicky Smallwood

based on Mark 12:38-44 and Acts 4:32-37

Mark 12: 38-44

The Widow's Offering

³⁸ As he taught, 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, ³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

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. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

Acts 4: 32-37

The Believers Share Their Possessions

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

I'll start by introducing myself. I'm Nicky, a second year curate in a Benefice of 9 churches around Whitchurch. I started out as a small animal vet, but my life took quite a different direction after God got hold of me.

Now I spend most of my time working in chaplaincy:

- Part time Anna Chaplain, for older people – mainly working in 2 large care homes.
- Part time Chaplain at Naomi House and Jacksplace hospices for children and young adults.

I live in Whitchurch with Robin and our 3 teenage boys.

The reason I'm here today is because clergy are being mixed around a bit to kick off "Generous June"!

I think the first thing to acknowledge about these two passages is that they are both extremely challenging.

We live in a materialistic world where wealth is highly valued, and success is measured by our achievements, and our income. And we mostly live as individual households – as opposed to living in community with others.

So, when we read passages which speak of a poor widow giving *all* of her money to the temple, or of Barnabas who sells a field and gives *all* the money he receives to the apostles – it challenges us to re-consider our own generosity.

And it can make us feel pretty uncomfortable because we like to hold on to our stuff.

But once again, Jesus' teaching highlights that in the Kingdom of God, what is most valued is rather different from that of our human kingdom.

Making sure everyone in a community has enough is far more important than individual wealth.

Relationships, kindness and love trumps everything.

This morning, I'll mainly be focusing on the Mark passage. Jesus is in Jerusalem with his disciples during holy week. We've had his triumphant entrance on Palm Sunday and this passage makes up a small part of his poignant teaching in the run up to his arrest and crucifixion.

And I think it's interesting to consider why Mark brought these 2 short accounts together back-to-back in this way.

The first section is a warning to the teachers of the law, after Jesus notices the way in which they behave:

- They wear expensive clothing, which marks them out as highly-honoured.
- They are filled with self-importance, putting on a show in public at fancy dinner parties, and in using eloquent language in prayer.
- They take advantage of vulnerable widows.

None of this impresses Jesus and he calls out their hypocrisy.

The second section is an account of Jesus quietly watching the crowd put their money into the temple treasury.

He watches rich people throw in large amounts – no doubt enjoying the loud rattle as their coins drop in. Then Jesus spots a poor widow who puts in a very small amount in monetary terms.

But, Jesus highlights the huge significance of her giving; telling us that the widow has actually given far more than everyone else, because she has given out of her poverty, whereas the others have all given out of their affluence.

So, why might these two stories have been positioned next to each other?

Well, both stories mention widows, but rather than the similarities, what strikes me is the *contrast* in the motivation which drives the characters.

And perhaps this *contrast* in motivation is important for inspiring or informing our motivations when it comes to giving generously.

So, let's look at the motivations involved.

Firstly, the Temple teachers. As they flaunt around in their long expensive robes – they ooze arrogance and are clearly concerned with status, and how they appear to others. We can recognise pride and greed.

In fact, these faith leaders *should* be bound by their faith to *help* the widow – to *lift* her out of her poverty, and yet she has been forgotten.

They are so pre-occupied with their own comforts that they have failed to support one of the most vulnerable and poor people in their community. They are arrogant, proud and greedy.

The widow (on the other hand) has so little, and yet she gives all she has to the Temple treasury for the work of God. She could have kept one coin back for herself, but she chose to give everything, leaving herself with nothing.

To the scribes, she is poor and insignificant. But to Jesus, she is a model of humility, faithfulness and generosity.

She is motivated by her desire to love and serve God and her neighbour. And her giving comes from a place of faith, and trust. Trusting that God will provide for her daily needs. What an incredible faith she has.

And what a contrast to the greed, arrogance and pride of the scribes.

Jesus does not condemn wealthy people for making large gifts, but he does say that this woman's offering means so much more. Jesus bases his calculation, not on what she or we *give*, but on what we have *left* (or what the gift *costs* us).

Jesus gauges generosity not on the monetary value of our gift, but on the *cost* of the gift to the *giver*. *True* generosity is sacrificial, and it hurts. It means giving so that *others* might gain and we as the giver might lose something or go without.

We might all breathe a sigh of relief when I say that Jesus is not telling us to go and do likewise. But he is challenging us to listen carefully, to pray about this story and to ask him how he would like each of us to respond.

Of course, the roots of generosity are always found in God, because God gave everything in the person of Jesus, and held nothing back. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus demonstrated to us what it means to be generous. Which brings me onto another of our motivations to give.

We should be motivated by thankfulness of what God has already given to us. Our generosity should be our response to God's generosity.

The widow's generosity imitates that of Jesus. She gave all that she had; holding nothing back.

But generosity is much broader than just financial giving – sometimes throwing money at a situation might actually be the easy option.

Maybe, God is prompting us to be generous in other ways. Perhaps with our time, our attention, our talents, our possessions, or how about being generous with our reputation or our comforts? What could that mean?

But, however we feel drawn to be generous, we must keep checking our motivations.

Does our giving come from a place of humility, of faith and thankfulness, and a desire to love and serve God and our neighbour?

I've been so struck recently by the generosity of those I know locally, who have opened up their homes and lives to receive Ukrainian refugees.

When I hear of a couple of families sharing their own living space with strangers: their kitchen and bathroom with people they have never met before – out of love for their neighbour – I find that generosity extremely humbling.

I'd just like to finish by briefly mentioning the Acts reading. Sometimes when we read the bible, we benefit from reading a few verses meditatively, slowly, chewing them over in prayer with God.

But there's also something to be gained from reading several chapters of a book at a time. And when we read a big chunk at the start of Acts – we can stand back and notice the bigger picture of the work of the Holy Spirit.

And we notice the overwhelming energy of the Holy Spirit which sweeps through everyone. The disciples are literally bouncing off the walls with joy, energy and boldness:

- They *know* that Jesus has defeated evil and death.
- They've been healing everyone who has been brought to them.
- They've been locked up in prison, but have been miraculously released by angels.
- Peter has got up and started preaching about Jesus with a new confidence and boldness.
- And when they pray together, the building *shakes* as they are filled with the Holy Spirit. This is awesomely powerful stuff.

And it's into this context that the believers are sharing all their possessions with those in need. So, much of their motivation would probably have been prompted by the energy and drive of the Holy Spirit.

We also need the Holy Spirit to inform all that we do. And we need the Holy Spirit to help us process the incredible generosity we've read about in this morning's readings.

Let's remember to invite the Holy Spirit into our lives afresh every morning, and ask him/her how we as individuals or a community should respond in generosity this June.

- Maybe we can increase our regular giving, or perhaps start regular giving for the first time?
- Or is Jesus' Spirit challenging us to share or give something else – perhaps our time, our talents, or our possessions?

The kind of generosity that Jesus is talking about might well be triggered by the power of his Spirit. But then our generosity should come from motivations of thankfulness, of faith, humility and a desire to love and serve God and our neighbour.

And crucially Jesus is challenging us all towards sacrificial generosity. A generosity which essentially means that by giving, we give some of our comfort away to someone else so that they might gain; the giving costs us something. This is a challenge for all of us, including me!

Amen.