

LENT WEEK 6 – Day 2

READING

As he taught [in the temple], Jesus said, for all to hear, “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 honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

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. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

“Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down.

REFLECTION

It’s important in the lead up to the crucifixion to understand the context surrounding the story. Christ has made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his reaction was to weep. He alone knows what is coming and how misguided these fickle followers and tone deaf people are. He spends the time between that entry and his death, searching and testing for true believers. He is vocal about the gravity of unbelief. And he is scathing in his interactions with those who are pious and certain of their own righteousness. For this reflection, I want us to see ourselves in the religious elite. I, like anyone, deeply desire to do what’s right and stand up for the truth. But I also know that fear is a terrible place to argue from; it makes us pious and deaf. Unfortunately, fear is often our starting point, as Christians, when we interact with those whose ideas and beliefs differ from our own.

The reading opens with Jesus already having had some terse interactions with the religious leaders within the temple that day. They are seething with righteous anger. While he directs those opening comments to his disciples, he speaks loud enough for everyone in the temple to hear. His words are not kind but they are deadly accurate: The teachers of the law are fakes. Indeed, they know the ins and outs of Scripture, they dress appropriately, they speak the right words, but it makes no difference to how they live their lives; it convicts them of nothing and is used to bolster their certainty. “They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers.” I can’t help but think this might even be a reference to Ahab and Jezebel; rightful heirs

but emanating wickedness. They scheme and kill Naboth and then devour his vineyard. Elijah was uncompromising in his declaration of the pure evil of this pair.

Then Jesus does something very interesting. He seats himself next to the treasury, where everyone can see him, and he watches as people bring their tithes. Remember, he's already cleared out the temple once. He's been blunt about how blind everyone is, living in the comfort of religion that reassures them that they are on the right track. He sits and he watches. The wealthy give large gifts; at a minimum it will be a 10% tithe in keeping with the requirement of the law. But Christ doesn't thank them or pat them on the back. Instead, he calls his disciples' attention to a widow who places a couple of pennies in the treasury. Pennies.

Jesus has just accused the religious leaders of devouring widows' houses. And here that widow is, giving the last of what she has. Two things strike me about this. First, is she poor because her financial worth has been devoured by those in positions of power? I'm not sure of the answer but it gives me pause; what are we doing with our power, intentionally or otherwise. The second thing that strikes me is: would I have the guts to give up all my worth while someone was watching, especially if it only equaled a couple of pennies? Or would I be too ashamed? If I'm ashamed, it reveals what I think is worthwhile and of value: wealth. Not necessarily as something to accumulate but even as a tool for helping, for surely it is! And so if I give out of my poverty, that will a) expose my poverty and b) not really be of any use. But Christ makes it very clear: it has nothing to do with the amount being given but with the heart behind the giving. The widow is unashamed. She gives because she wants to and then she moves on; she's not worried about who's watching, whether it measures up to everyone else's giving, if it is enough, or what she has left over. It is enough, because she understands who she is giving it to...a God who doesn't need our finances AND who is looking out for every detail of our lives if we let him. He just wants us! This is why Christ proclaims she has put in more than everyone else - she has given herself in complete faith that God is enough.

Finally, in the last paragraph, Jesus and his disciples leave the temple. He's probably had enough, and I don't blame him; why can no one see the truth that is standing in front of them? As if to drive this home, both Luke and Mark record the disciples marvelling at the temple structure. I imagine it was something to marvel at! It would have been awe-inspiring as people came to worship God. In the same blunt manner, Jesus essentially responds to them by saying: this building is an empty shell that is about to be destroyed. He seems to be reiterating, that while everything is right on the outside, if it is void of God, it is useless. It's not the appearance of doing or being good that matters: the robes, the knowledge of the Bible, the giving of offerings, the going to church. It's the existence of a life transforming relationship with the Creator God that matters, nothing else.

REMINDER

God sees our hearts. He's not concerned by how we look, our financial situation, or our church attendance as matters unto themselves. He cares about the motivation behind it all. Are we driven by our sheer delight and joy at being free and in communion with him? Or are we driven by a sense of what we think we should do or be? These two postures are vastly different. Come unencumbered by your own expectations and just bring yourself before God. You are all he wants anyway!

PRAYER

God, help us to keep our ears and eyes towards you. Help us to get out of our own way. You are not interested in our put-together version of ourselves. Help us to recognize that all you want from us is us, souls bared and at our most vulnerable. May this set us free so that we can give ourselves wholly to you. Help us to understand that this is where true freedom lies!