Dear Friends,

Giving away bread when you are hungry!

Reflecting on the stories of widows I am reminded of a Movie project I accepted to produce while in Kenya. The script was written by Sr. Dr Dominic Dipio, a Ugandan nun, who was a literary icon from Makarere University. The movie “A Meal to Forget” based on real event, told the poignant story of a father who took the lives of his children with a special meal rather than see them die slowly of starvation. Poverty is real in many parts of the world and the poor must make hard choices. The first reading and the Gospel today present poor widows who took the bold decisions and gave their whole lives and means of livelihood to God. Today’s liturgy also reveals some important facts about the poor.

1) The poor are blessed because they have a greater recognition of their need for God. The two widows in the readings give up everything, totally trusting in the goodness of the Lord. 2) The poor are therefore more generous than others. Jesus made it very clear that “this poor widow contributed more than all the others who donated to the treasury.” Recent studies in the United States reveal the same phenomenon: relative to their resources, lower income people are the most generous. 3) The poor may or may not have society on their side, but there is no doubt where God stands. Our responsorial Psalm tells us that the Lord “secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets captives free, gives sight to the blind, raises up those that were bowed down, protects strangers, and sustains the fatherless and the widow.”

Real poverty, even though it is dehumanizing on so many levels, can allow a person to see clearly and to know his or her need for God. Spiritual poverty, which involves a deepening freedom before what we have, or what has come to be our identity, takes us to a place of trust. Poverty, which is spiritual, helps us to know what we really need. It is the difference between asking, “Help me to have more!” and asking, “Help me to trust in you when I find myself having less.”

In that place of dependence upon God, the jar doesn’t go empty, and the jug never runs dry. Then, instead of asking God to take away my troubles, to punish my enemies, I’m asking God to help me to be a healer, to help me be generous because I’m noticing those who are in greater need than I am. It is sometimes said that it is common for us who have plenty, to give from our surplus. It is also said that those of us who are poor often give, even from what we need. When our wants become far less than our income, we become rich not by acquiring more money, but progressively reducing our wants. This way of living also opens us to view the means that we have as belonging to others as well, rather than using everything just focused on self.

With these readings today, we could each ask for the grace to be able to give more - from deeper inside of us. We can ask, who needs this kind of generosity from me. Who in my family needs what I had previously felt is more than I could give? Who in the world needs my charity, beyond what I have left over after I take care of my needs first? Those among us who are not poor receive the challenge to be poor in spirit. We pray for freedom of spirit “… so that we may more willingly give our lives in service to all.”

How can we imagine being this generous, this free? We can only get closer to that place by asking for these graces boldly, by letting God love us into freedom, by letting our Lord convince us that our real happiness will be in letting go of more and more and falling into the hands of a loving God who keeps faith forever and who sets captives free. [Psalm 146]

Be blessed, Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.
FIRST READING
She left and did as Elijah had said. She was able to eat for a year, and he and her son as well; the jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, as the LORD had foretold through Elijah. (1 Kgs 17:15-16)

PSALM
Praise the Lord, my soul! (Ps 146)
or: Alleluia

SECOND READING
But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice. (Heb 9:26)

GOSPEL
"Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood." (Mk 12:43-44)


WORSHIP & MEDITATION

LIVE AUTHENTICALLY & WALK WITH HOLINESS

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

On December 10, 1979, a very petite holy woman known as Mother Teresa of Calcutta spoke these words in her Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, "But I am sure in the families and many of our homes, maybe we are not hungry for a piece of bread, but maybe there is somebody there in the family who is unwanted, unloved, uncared, forgotten, there isn't love. Love begins at home. And love to be true has to hurt. I never forget a little child who taught me a very beautiful lesson. They heard in Calcutta, the children, that Mother Teresa had no sugar for her children, and this little one, Hindu boy four years old, he went home and he told his parents: I will not eat sugar for three days. I will give my sugar to Mother Teresa. How much a little child can give. After three days they brought into our house, and there was this little one who could scarcely pronounce my name, he lived with great love, he loved until it hurt. And this is what I bring before you, to love one another until it hurts, but don't forget that there are many children, many children, many men and women who haven't got what you have. And remember to love them until it hurts."

Living authentically and walking with holiness always involves sacrifice. It has to hurt. Only actions springing from true and deep sacrifice demonstrate true integrity. Without sacrifice, even what is apparently a generous gesture can be nothing. It is no wonder that the widow who contributed from her poverty received great admiration from Jesus and the young child in our story above the interest of Mother Teresa. It is easy to make the houses of our lives look like they are in perfect order when in fact they are in shambles within. Religion can sometimes make this hypocritical masquerade easy to accomplish. We can find ourselves in all the right holy places, reciting all of the correct prayers, participating in community collections, and reciting the proper doctrines only to find ourselves empty, shallow, self-focused, and overly anxious about personal concerns.

The one who learns to discover their inner poverty, their spiritual poverty, is the only one who can truly place him or herself at the mercy of God. It is only when we allow ourselves to be empty that we realize Who we actually need to fill us. This is the real meaning of trust. Many of us are afraid to take the plunge. We allow ourselves to detach from only so much, always keeping a watchful eye on the protection of our securities. We understand the value of poverty, but we do not want to become too poor. As long as we are able to recognize this tension, our reluctance to let go and our struggle, we can continue our journey of humbly learning how to love so deeply that it hurts. God understands and waits.
The first reading, 1 Kings 17:10-16. This particular passage is one in a collection of stories of miracles wrought by the prophet Elijah who would challenge King Ahab and his cruel pagan Queen Jezebel over the issue of worship of the false god, Baal. Complementing the story of the Widow’s Mite told in today’s Gospel, the first reading explains how another poor, pagan widow, a Syro-Phoenician living in Zarephath in the territory of Sidon, in the middle of a famine and with little left for herself, shares the last of her meager resources with the prophet Elijah. As a reward for her sacrificial generosity, she receives God’s blessing for the remaining months of the famine in the form of sufficient continuing daily provisions which ensure their survival. Elijah, instructed by the Lord God and following the Near Eastern custom, has asked for hospitality in the form of food and accommodation. The widow is not unwilling but tells the prophet that she has enough for only one meal for her son and herself. Nevertheless, Elijah asks her to demonstrate her trust in his God’s provision by first giving food to himself, as the man of God. She does as he asks, and we know what happened. Her jar of meal and the jug of oil did not empty until the drought had ended. This story of the widow’s provisions, like the following story of Elijah’s raising of her son to life again after the boy had died, also emphasizes the power of God’s word and His love for those who love Him, working through the prophet’s prayers, words, and actions. The fact that Yahweh is directing the course of events appears in the repeated use of God’s "word" (vv8, 16) or Elijah’s "word" (v15), as they appear in the Hebrew text, and the clear promise of replenished flour and oil by God’s decree (v14).

The second reading: Heb 9:24 - 28. The author of Hebrews consistently views the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus against the background of its Jewish forerunners. In today’s passage the superiority of the offering of Christ lies in its non-repetitive character. At a determined historical moment, Christ the priest entered the heavenly eternal sanctuary (v24). This was in no way a mere reproduction of the Jerusalem sanctuary; it belongs wholly to the realm of God. There Christ continues to offer on behalf of humanity the one sacrifice of Calvary, now transcendent in character (7:25; Rom 8:34).

The author then considers the way in which this sacrifice differs from the annual Day of Atonement ritual, also offered in expiation for sin. First, Christ’s is not a sacrifice repeated on a regular basis. If such were the case, he would have had to perform this priestly service from the beginning, since it is offered for all people and all ages (v25f). In fact he has appeared only once. That one sacrifice, now ever present to the Father, satisfies for all sin past and present. Second, the blood offered is not that of an animal but that of the high priest himself, Jesus, God’s Son (v25). End of the ages (v26): the time of Jesus, the final era of redemption, to be closed with the Parousia (the second coming of Christ). Here the author clearly moves away from the tiered philosophical universe, with which he is conversant, to the traditional Jewish linear view of history.

Gospel Insights

Jesus himself observes the widow (v41) and later summons his disciples for the "teaching" moment (v43). The coins which she offers (Gr: lepla) were the smallest in circulation; their market value was minimal (v42). The offering of two insinuates that she could have kept one for herself.

Jesus’ statement that hers was the major contribution requires explanation (v43f). Others gave with little or no sense of sacrifice. Even after their donations, their needs would be amply met. But the widow deprives herself and felt the pain in giving from the little that she had. Hers was the true spirit of generosity and religious dedication.

The story of the "widow’s mite" is not just an interesting insight into Jewish Palestinian life. It is really the type of generosity that we meet day after day. It is humbling to think of how people with limited resources and heavy financial responsibilities sacrifice themselves for others, whether at home or in foreign lands. And it is done with grace and a smile. Many times, writing a check is the easiest way to exercise charity. Certainly it is good in itself and not to be disdained. But so often a duty discharged through donation is forgotten ten minutes after it is done. There are people for whom it is much more important to give of their time than their money.

Time is costly; we feel the pinch. But there are always those little people who preach the best homilies by their lives. They give of the little they have. They may light a candle for a sick friend, request a mass card for a cause close to their heart, contribute to a food kitchen or a clothing drive. They seek those who are poorer than they at every turn. In northern India, among the Catholic tribals, people contribute to the church in kind. That means an egg or some rice in the Sunday collection. It comes from poverty but it comes with love. It is today’s gospel come to life.
Compliment or lamentation?

Oddly, some modern Bible commentators argue that Jesus’ statement that this poor widow put in all she had, was not intended primarily as praise of the woman but was meant both as a prophetic denunciation of the members of the Temple establishment who took advantage of such little people and as the expression of his personal moral indignation at the situation. How, they ask, could Mark’s Jesus praise someone for sacrificing everything to a place and system which, even in the first century, Christians believed Jesus had replaced?

According to John Pilch (The Cultural World of Jesus), speaking of the widow who put her two mites in the Temple collection box, “Jesus laments this woman’s behavior because she has been taught ‘sacrificial giving’ by her religious leaders. Jesus’ constant Gospel teaching had been grounded in a belief that religion was never to use people’s benevolence to enrich itself. Yet Mark clearly focuses on the widow’s deed. In contrast to the external signs of honor sought by the scribes, she sought only to please God, and she, not they, possessed true honor in God’s eyes. The simple piety of this woman of no social standing is contrasted with the arrogance and social ambitions of some so-called religious leaders. This poor woman, in a daring act of trust in God’s providence, put into the treasury everything she had. Her action symbolized what Jesus would do by offering his very life to God his Father as an act of perfect obedience.”

QUIZ TIME

1. Who took care of Elijah?
   A) A raven  B) A widow  C) Moses  D) The chief priests

2. What food items never ran out for the widow, her son, and Elijah?
   A) Milk and honey  B) Water and manna  C) Pizza and breadsticks  D) Flour and oil

3. What will Christ do when He comes again?
   A) Take away sin  B) Bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him  C) Start a new Church  D) Die on the cross again

4. Who did Jesus say gave the most to the treasury?
   A) The rich people  B) The poor widow  C) The scribes  D) The Apostles

5. How many coins did the widow give?
   A) Two  B) Ten  C) Twenty  D) More than anyone could count

QUIZ ANSWERS


Any Questions?

1. Recount the times when your generosity brought about abundance in your life.
2. If there is a split between what you do in your heart and what you say with your lips. Is hypocrisy present?
3. In what ways can you reduce your wants and give to others who lack the basics?