

Sermon by Fr John Spring – Sunday 8 November 2009

Readings: Ruth 3. 1-14; 4. 1, 5-6, 9-12, Ps 146, 1 Kings 17. 8-16 Mark 12. 38-44

Religion,” says James 1.27, “that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world”.

Obviously there is far more to a religion than caring for widows and orphans and keeping oneself morally and spiritually clean. Not only do we inherit a great many other elements of our religious life – a relationship with and knowledge of God, as well as beliefs, practices, traditions and so forth – but we also add to them from time to time. Today, for example, we and many other Christians would add caring for and preserving the environment to our religious commitment.

Even so, James (Jacob, that is) makes these two things the measure of whether one’s religious practice is “pure and undefiled *before God the Father*”. God’s *fatherly* relationship with his people, and our relation to God as our Father, is expressed here in terms of his care for orphans and widows and our exhibiting the same care. Good religion, religion that is pure and undefiled in *his* sight, is also summed up in terms of our striving for moral, ethical and spiritual purity, in order to resemble, reflect and please him.

God, of course, has no gender. God is neither male nor female, but God does have masculine and feminine ways of interacting with creation and with us. If we were thinking about God’s *motherly* relationship with humankind, perhaps the emphasis might be different. For example, the emphasis might fall upon the obligation to provide for and protect *mothers and children*. However, James 1:27 makes it clear that, when we are thinking of our obligation to practice our religion in relation to God as our *Father*, we are to give high priority indeed to the needs of *widows and orphans* for whom men, as husbands and fathers, had a special obligation to provide.

In the early church, there was special provision made for widows who had no other family support, and in the First Letter to Timothy, St Paul sets out some rules to guide Bishop Timothy in the management of the support the church was to provide.

To begin with, Paul draws a distinction between three types of widow. There were widows who were younger, and who were looking to remarry. “The Young Widows”, we might call them. Then there were also those who did not really want to remarry but enjoyed the pleasures being courted by men in the hope of getting a wife. “The Merry Widows”, we might call them. Paul did not classify these two types of widow as “real widows” for religious and church purposes.

Then there were those poor widows with no family support, no desire to remarry and little or no prospect of remarrying. These women had to rely solely upon God and the Church, and devoted their lives to the Church, to their religion and to Jesus Christ as their husband. These, for Paul, were the “real widows”. He says to Timothy, “**Honour widows who are really widows**” (1Timothy 5.3). He explains that “**The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day**” (1Timothy 5.5). To be even more specific he says, “**Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once**” (1Timothy 5.9).

The Church’s care for these widows, who had been left without family support and who had no likelihood of remarrying, arose in an immediate sense out of the need of the many women in society who were in this position. Given the hardships, strife and violence of the day, many men died young and left their wives and children unprovided for. Of course, their brothers and sisters, their adult children and grandchildren, were supposed to take them in and care for them, but it is clear that this was often not the case, both in Jewish and in Greek society.

It is also clear that standards of care and support varied between Christian populations. We know this from the reference, in Chapter 6, verse 1 of the Acts of the Apostles, to a dispute which arose in the early church between the Jewish and Greek Christians. The Greek Christians said their widows were missing out on the daily ration of food. Instead of everything being pooled and distributed equally, the Jewish Christians were looking after their own, and the Greeks after theirs, and the Jewish Christians seem to have been better placed to provide food and support to widows and orphans. It was out of this dispute that there came the appointment of St Stephen and six other deacons to oversee the food distribution, or to “wait on table” as the Scriptures say elsewhere.

So we can think of the Church’s support of widows and orphans in terms of the Church responding to the cries of the poor at its door and in its midst, and widows of Jesus’ day were some of the most conspicuously needy who turned to the church for help. However, there is more to it than this. In Holy Scripture, in the Old Testament as in the New, written over perhaps two thousand years and across different societies, the widow is the epitome of the vulnerable human being. She is the person who has been deprived of male protection and provision, who may be turned away by her family and her children and grandchildren, who is forced to beg, who is open to humiliation, exploitation and abuse, and who may be driven into ways of making a living which would bring shame and disgrace as well as new levels of abuse and degradation.

God’s care for and deliverance of widows is celebrated in the Book of Ruth, in which the widow Ruth is taken by Boaz to be his wife. We see how vulnerable her position is when she leaves her homeland to follow her mother-in-law back to her land – an inspiring act of loyalty but also a very dangerous one for a widow woman. We see how she must risk everything to slip unseen into Boaz’s tent, to uncover his feet and allow him to cover her with his mantle – an appeal for him to take her under his protection, as wife or even as concubine -- and then to slip away again before daybreak. How easily this could have ended in disaster for her! We also see again how vulnerable her position is when one relative who has a right to claim her as his bride declines to do so, and we rejoice to think Boaz married her as he said he would when he might easily have had second thoughts and cast her off.

In 1 Kings 17:8-16, the story of the Widow of Zarephath takes us even further into the harsh reality of what being a widow could mean. Unlike Ruth, this woman was already living in extreme poverty, and she has a dependent son for whom she cannot provide. When Elijah meets her, she is going home to prepare a meagre meal with the last of the food she has. However, Elijah asks her to allow him to share in their meal of bread and when she does, the jar of meal and the jug of oil are miraculously filled and go on being filled. The woman is subjected to a test of faith and, out of reverence for the prophet, and according to the laws of hospitality, she shared what little she had. As a result, she is rewarded and sees the providence of God.

In many places in the world, this kind of exposure is still the case for widows. When I was the Chairman of the Refugee and Migrant Ministry in Brisbane Diocese, and was working with Ethiopian refugee resettlement within my own parish, many of the women we ministered to had been selected for immigration into Australia on the basis that they had no male protector or provider, and many had suffered abuse and exploitation as a result. Hardship for a great many widows was also the case here in Australia not all that long ago. My father served in the Air Force in New Guinea as a radio operator during the War. When my father died at 49, my mother tried to raise my brother and me on a War Widow’s Pension. When I left school and found work in a department store cafeteria, and then in the Public Service, I used to give her my wages to help meet the cost of feeding and clothing us.

However, even though she found some work in a woolstore canteen (through the good offices of a Presbyterian neighbour who also made sure she got food to take home with her), she eventually had to hand ownership of the family home over to the Housing Commission so that they would see to its repairs and repainting. I can still recall the humiliation I sensed in her when she had to go to government departments for assistance – such as to ask for the fares to get to Rockhampton to visit our family there. We were very poor and she was a poor widow indeed.

So there is a lot of focus on the needs of widow's in the readings today, but the Gospel is not really a story about the sufferings of the poor widow. Instead, it first of all illustrates the *religious hypocrisy* of the Scribes by saying that they "devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers". Then it tells of the relative value of a widow's tiny offering and the much larger donations of the well-off. Jesus says, **"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."**

Of course, there is a parallel between the story of the widow of Zarephath who shared not only her own but her son's last meal with a prophet, and the story of the widow who put "everything she had, all she had to live on" into the Temple collection box.

But Jesus knows that his listeners will fill in the background and does not need to talk about the hardships endured by the widow. The mere mention of the word "widow" was enough, I suspect, to make people shudder and pray that this would never be the lot of anyone in their family.

But what about now? Today, living in a society which has a far more developed social welfare system and organisations which work to relieve the needs of the poor, we are, I think, losing a sense of how vulnerable a widow can be. Indeed, a woman need not be someone in pressing need at all simply by virtue of being a widow. Women today are not as dependent on husbands as they once were. Many women have education and training which enables them to work in their own right, and can look after themselves. They are entitled to assistance with the raising of their children. Many widows continue to work through the years and retire on superannuation and pensions. And many remarry.

So if we were to ask which class of person was the epitome the person at risk in our society, we would not, perhaps, nominate the widow.

I wonder, then, which class of person you might think typified human vulnerability and need? Refugees? The homeless poor? Indigenous people living in impoverished conditions, in isolated communities, without opportunities for work, self-improvement and advancement in life? Or single mothers who are turned out of their affordable seaside housing come Christmas to make way for cashed-up holiday makers?

Whichever class or persons you nominate, the gospel story tells us that Jesus and his Father have a special wrath reserved for those who rob the poor of what little they have *and* then mask their crime and cruelty with religion. As Jesus says, **"They will receive the greater condemnation"**.

Whichever class of persons you choose to represent the poor and vulnerable of the world, the gospel story also tells us that, when it comes to giving to the church, *the sincere religious offerings of the poorest are worth more to God than all the gifts and donations of the rich*, for out of their poverty the poorest often dare to give all they can afford, while the rich often give what they can easily do without and will probably never miss.

Yet why is it that some of the poorest give at such risk to themselves? It is because giving is a prayer to God for his protection and provision, for his mercy and blessing. In Common Prayer, we repeatedly pray "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy", appealing to God the Son to shower his mercies upon us. Yet from ancient times, it is clear from the teaching of Jesus that *it is with the measure that we give that blessing shall be measured out to us*. It may be forgiveness, it may be healing, it may be to have children, it may be for success in a job application, it may be a sunny day for your granddaughter's wedding.

(The New Testament teaches us the only gift God does not give by measure is the Holy Spirit – either you have the Spirit or you don't.) So whatever the blessings we earnestly desire in our lives (apart from the Holy Spirit), we do well to approach God as those who give generously and may therefore hope to receive no less generously. We must be generous in forgiving, in helping, in showing kindness, in putting

ourselves out for others and in giving. We must seek *to be* a blessing in order that we might *receive blessing*; and when we ask for blessing, it is not just for us.

It is also that *we might be blessed* so as *to be a greater blessing* to others. So it is that the Kingdom of God grows in the world.

Let us pray:

Teach us, Good Lord,
to serve thee as thou deservest:
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for any reward
Save that of knowing that we do thy will.
Amen

John Spring