

The Widow's Mite



Mark 12:42 "Jesus sat down opposite the (Temple) treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then (Jesus) called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all (that) she had to live on.'"

I suspect that we are all familiar with the story of the Widow's Mite, which often plays an important role in the stewardship campaigns of churches at this time of year. In doing so, however, we may be missing the larger story here. Jesus, we are told, sat opposite the treasury which supported the Temple in Jerusalem and watched the crowd putting money in, as the scribes recorded their donations. And so, Jesus observed how the rich people put in large sums, while this poor widow put in everything she had to live on. Note, however, what Jesus doesn't do in this story. Jesus doesn't make any financial contribution himself to the Temple's treasury. Nor does he instruct his disciples to do so. Nor does he direct his disciples to assist the poor widow, whom, as he just observed, put in every penny that she had to live on. Nor does Jesus do anything for her either. He just sits there watching. And as he watches, I think he may have been getting madder and madder. In the earlier part of this reading from Mark, Jesus warned his listeners to beware of the scribes. "They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers," he tells his disciples. So, perhaps the widow isn't giving from a spirit of generosity at all, but from a sense of guilt, that is weighed down upon her by the religious authorities of her day. Perhaps after giving the temple treasury her last mite, she will lose her house too, to

be 'devoured' by the scribes who might then sell it for additional income.

I believe this story may be part of the fuel that led Jesus to cleanse the temple as recorded in the chapter before today's Gospel, where Jesus overturns the tables and chases out the money-changers with a whip. For remember that when the chief priests and the scribes heard about Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, they, we are told, kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. Shortly after that event, Jesus told the parable of the Wicket Tenants, who refused to pay their due to the Landlord's servants when they came to collect it and beat up those servants like the prophets of old, such that the Landlord, we are told, sent his only son, surely, they would respect my son, he said. And what did the wicked tenants do, they threw the son out of the vineyard and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, Jesus asked the crowd, what will he do to those tenants? And the disciples said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his due at harvest time.'

So, after today's story, as Jesus is leaving the Temple one of his disciples marvels over the magnificence of the building.

"Look, what massive stones," he says. That's next week's Gospel, but note that Jesus is not impressed, and responds "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down," he declares. And remember that the Sanhedrin will later arrest Jesus and charge him for threatening to destroy the temple. But Jesus was right, less than 40 years later, after a terrible siege of the city of Jerusalem by the Romans, their forces broke through the walls and burnt Herod's great Temple to the ground, not one stone was left upon another. All that was left of the Temple was the Western Wall, which stands there still today. For years thereafter Jews were allowed back in the city of Jerusalem for only one day a year, which became the Jewish fast of Tisha B'Av, regarded as the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, where the Jews mourned at that so-called Wailing Wall, still today the most sacred place of prayer for the Jewish people.

So, what happened after the Temple, the center of religious life for the Jews, was destroyed? The Sadducees, the aristocratic and priestly class that made up the Sanhedrin and maintained the Temple, became extinct soon after its destruction. The Essenes, that mystical Jewish sect made famous by the Dead Sea Scrolls, fled across the River Jordan during the Jewish rebellion and disappeared from the scene. The zealots

were leading the fight in Jerusalem and were slaughtered. The Herodians continued until 92 C.E., when the last Hasmonaean monarch died, and Rome assumed full political power over the region. Only the Pharisees and Christians survived among the former Jewish religious parties, each with a different focus for their followers, and they famously disputed with one another over the future direction of Judaism.

The center of worship for Jews moved from the now destroyed Temple in Jerusalem to the local synagogues, where Christians and Jews often violently disagreed with each other over Scriptural interpretation, see Paul and his travels for instance, or St. Stephen, the martyr. Eventually, the sacrifices required at the Temple, were replaced by the reading and study of the Torah, as the Pharisees slowly morphed into modern rabbinic Judaism as we know it still today.

Christians back in the first century, tried to move Judaism in another direction, with Jesus at the center, as these early Jewish Christians interpreted the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem as a punishment by God for the failure of Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Since Jewish Christians did not play a significant role in the defense of the Temple, there was a lot of newfound hatred towards the Christians, who began to be barred from synagogues, cursed in official prayers, and who went

off increasingly to form House Churches of their own that were eventually filled more with Gentiles than Jews. Still the Church appropriated the language of the Temple in its ritual and practices. The Church had its own priests and altars, and its own talk about the sacrifice of the Mass, and the blood of the lamb that was shed for us.

And this theology of that time can be seen developing in many places of the Christian Scriptures. Think, for instance, of the Parable of the Great Banquet, that is repeated in several different places in the Gospels, where those invited to the feast refused to come, and where the servants were ordered by the master to go out into the highways and byways and invite in the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In Matthew's famous re-telling of this story, the king is so enraged that his friends had declined the invitation to his son's wedding banquet that he is said to have sent out his troops, killed those who refused his invitations, and burned their city to the ground, a clear allusion, think historians, to the destruction of Jerusalem. The clear suggestion in these stories is that God rejected the Jews with the destruction of the Temple and that Christians took their place in the vineyard. This is the beginning of the so-called 'displacement theory' that many branches of Christianity will later hold as doctrine, and which

sadly will eventually lead Christians to massacre Jews again and again and again over the centuries as the rejected ones of God.

And no book from the New Testament dealt more directly with the development of this new religious reality than the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews, which we have had as our second Reading for the last several weeks, and which will continue to be so until the Feast of Christ the King. The Epistle to the Hebrews suggested that God didn't need the Temple anymore, because Jesus' death, once for all upon the cross, fulfilled the demands of the ancient sacrificial offerings of repentance that used to be made at the Temple. The author of Hebrews even imagines a New Jerusalem and a new Temple, not made by human hands, but in heaven, where Jesus serves as our Great High Priest, entering the real Holy of Holies and not just a mere copy of it here on earth, and pleading with God there on our behalf, which is next week's reading. Here Jesus' death replaces the need of the Yom Kippur sacrifices at the Temple, because Jesus is the Lamb of God that has taken away the sin of the world. Christ is our Passover sacrificed for us.

Though this Epistle may not matter much to us, it mattered greatly to those early Jewish Christians. It helped them make sense of this tragedy in their religious lives and practices, not only of the death of Jesus but also of the destruction of

the Temple and the City of David. So let us not forget how those early Christians were comforted by an understanding of Jesus's death as a fulfilment of the Temple, and their hope for a New Jerusalem, one where God would wipe away every tear from our eyes, where death would be no more; where mourning and weeping and pain would cease, and there would only be life everlasting with God in a heavenly Jerusalem, for the first things have passed away. Amen.