

## Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time B - God Prefers Generosity from the Heart November 7, 2021.

This Sunday's Gospel reading (Mark 12:38-44) tells us there are two ways of being generous: the way of the scribes, and the way of the widow. The scribes were the experts in interpreting the Law of Moses which was the core of Jewish culture. And so the people of ancient Israel respected and revered the scribes. But Jesus was unhappy with them. Without a doubt, they worked long, hard hours; they were always busy with worthy projects. But, unfortunately, their natural intellectual gifts and elevated social function had gone to their heads. **Instead of exercising their leadership as a service to the nation and to their neighbours, they were flaunting it to stoke their vanity, increase their comfort, and enhance their reputation. The higher they climbed, the more they looked down on everyone else. They considered themselves superior because they gave more time, talent, and treasure to the Temple than anyone else. But this was a one-dimensional view of generosity. The scribes were forgetting that all those external things were actually gifts God had given them in the first place.**

What God truly wants is our hearts and not our possessions. He wants our love; he wants us to trust him. This is what the poor widow gave to him. She didn't just share some of her abundance; she handed over to God all of her wealth as if she is saying: **"Lord, you are my good shepherd, and I will follow wherever you lead."** That was a prayer the scribes never prayed. They considered that they were doing God a favour by serving him; the widow understood that God was the one doing the favours. That's the kind of generosity God wants to see flourish in each one of us.

This same lesson comes across clearly in today's First Reading (1 Kings 17:10-16). We don't know if the widow who was gathering sticks would have recognized that Elijah was the famous prophet. But even if she did, she had very little reason to comply with his request for a drink of water. A drought and a famine had devastated the country, and she and her only son were on the verge of starvation. She was suffering intensely, she had grave problems of her own, and she had plenty of reasons to lash out at someone who ignored her suffering and asked favours of her. It is in times of hardship and stress that our true character shines out. **And in the case of this widow, her character was truly courageous. She left aside her own work loving her neighbour as herself. And when Elijah asked more than she could give, she didn't become vindictive or angry, but simply stated the facts. She was a woman who recognized her own dependence on God, and as a result she was able to be generous towards others who were in need. Her selfless generosity accurately reflected God's goodness. And God rewards her for it. He showers her with his blessings, proving that she was right to trust in him; that he truly is the Lord of the universe.** God doesn't always insulate us from the sufferings of life in a fallen world, as he did with this widow after she met Elijah. But if we, like her, humbly recognize our dependence on him by living generosity of the heart, we will not lose our reward.

Unless we gradually transform our self-centred, scribe-like tendencies into a Christ-centered, humble generosity like that of the widow, we will never be able to attain true Christian wisdom or experience true Christian joy. We can do two things to foster this transformation. First, we can ask God, every day, to purify our hearts, because without his grace we can do nothing (cf. John 15:5). Second, we can practise true, life-transforming virtue which can only be developed by conscious effort. It doesn't come from pills or feelings; it comes from exercise. Virtues, in this sense, are like muscles: the more we use them, the stronger they get. And the best place to exercise heart-felt, selfless generosity is at home. **In fact, family life is designed**

by God to be a gymnasium for all Christian virtues. It is easy to put on the appearance of generosity, like the scribes, when we are interacting with people outside our family circle, because they only see us every once in a while. At home, our family members see us all the time, and so they know the good, the bad, and the ugly. And so, finding creative ways to serve our family members is a sure path to purify our hearts of selfish motives; they simply won't be impressed with our efforts – they know us too well. There is little chance of family members praising us too much for helping with someone else's chores even when they didn't ask us, or for being the first to forgive after an argument or a fight, regardless who was at fault, or for leaving the last cookie for someone else without expecting any reward for ourselves. God wants to give us the freedom and joy of a truly generous heart. And he will, if we ask for his help, and if we do our part by practicing at home.

**'God is generous, giving, loving, forgiving, and gracious. God desires our loving response to His generosity.'** Most often our loving response is not sacrificial giving similar to that of the widow. Out of her poverty she gave and took the huge risk of not being able to afford to live other than living on God. In today's society that kind of giving may be frowned upon tremendously because of the thrill of the accumulation of material possession in our society. But, this widow understood giving to God was a sure way for a substantial return on her investment. True Christian generosity from the heart frees us from the self-destructive shackles of anger, resentment, and vengeance. Learning to give generously to God is a difficult lesson to master and yet there is no true following of Christ without such self-denial. The stories of the two widows teach us to give until it hurts, for it is in giving we receive. Jesus gave up everything for us on the cross. What are we willing to give up for those in need and for God? Because of our fallen human nature, we are most likely to follow the example of the scribes instead of the widow. We tend to work hard to please others, to show our self-worth on the outside and then we get upset or angry when we are not appreciated. It is not easy for us to purify our hearts of the self-centredness. **But we can make progress, under two conditions. First, we have to take small steps, being patient with ourselves as we gradually learn to do what is right out of a desire to please God, not other people. Second, we have to ask for God's help. His grace is our secret weapon, and too often we keep it on the shelf simply because we don't ask.**

A short prayer composed by **St Ignatius of Loyola** is particularly suited for growth in this type of heart-felt generosity. It goes like this: **Dear Lord, teach me to be generous; Teach me to serve you as you deserve; 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 labor, and not to ask for any reward - except that of knowing that I am doing your holy will. Amen.** So let's live it from our hearts, exercising our trust in his goodness and power, and offering our lives to him in thanksgiving for all he has given us, just like the poor widow.