

rejecting domination
a sermon preached on the
twenty-fourth sunday after Pentecost
8 November 2015
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

The Lections: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:23-28; Mark 12:38-44

The woman in today's gospel story is very well known. She is a memorable children's picture bible image. However, her economic poverty tends to be somewhat sidelined by an emphasis on her spiritual piety. In the way the church has tended to re-tell her story, she wins the piety award because she puts all her money into the temple treasury. The 'many rich people' with their 'large sums'¹ fade into the background as we focus on her piety.

But is Jesus counselling that it's a good thing that this woman puts into the temple treasury "all she had to live on"? Is this what Jesus intended? I do not think so.

As always, it's so important to read a gospel story in its context. This episode takes place around about the middle of a very busy and very long Tuesday of Jesus' final week.² The day begins with the predicted withering of the fig tree,³ and ends with Jesus returning to the fig tree as an image of the unreadiness of those who claim to be religious insiders.⁴ Between this fig-tree 'sandwich' Jesus castigates all the major religious leaders for their misuse of power, control – and wealth. In particular, he condemns powerful elites for manipulating and benefiting from a system which results in them gaining in wealth, the poorest losing even what little they have.

Jesus' priority is very clear. Immediately following today's episode Jesus tells disciples that the Temple – symbol of the power system – will be "thrown down".⁵ This he regards as good news because it will be a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God.

The thread running through the entire day is the issue of money – who has it, the illegitimate means by which they come to have it, the diabolical consequences for those who don't, and the evil of the economic system which violates God's covenant. "They devour widows houses", Jesus warns.⁶ The "long prayers" are a dishonest cover-up for the evil of the economy from which they benefit.

It's not surprising that the church has tended to ignore what is dominant in Jesus' teaching, and instead focus on the spiritual piety of the poor. For once the church became empire – and for much of 'Christendom' ever since – the church has been very wealthy. It has not been in our interests to draw attention to Jesus' teaching about the evils of systemic economic injustice – because we have for so long been the beneficiaries. And even though 'Christendom' as we knew it has gone, nevertheless we cling on, in all sorts of ways. And in any event, most of us in countries like Australia are the beneficiaries of global systemic economic injustice. This is obviously a very sensitive matter for us here at 'the junction'. The gospel interrogates our tendency to allow money to rule decision making.

Also, in a revealing commentary on the church, though there are so few Scripture texts about matters of sexuality, that's what Christians bang on about incessantly. Whereas there are literally thousands of Scripture texts about money, and especially systemic economic injustice – and yet we have almost nothing to say about that. Everyone else can see that our obsession with sex is of course a cover-up – an avoidance of dealing with the weightier matter.

Those who are baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ are those who recognise that Jesus has come to the centre of the system of power and domination – the Jerusalem temple – and who can see that in the temple being thrown down is the liberation of all people, the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Now let's be honest: this is *not* a children's story. This is a story for adults. This is a way, a spiritual path, requiring very adult consciousness and commitment. For baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ is the in-breaking of the kingdom of God – which calls into question all systems of power and domination. And the chief 'power of this world' – as everyone can see – is of course money. The Christ who

¹ Mark 12:41
² Mark 11:20 – 13:36
³ Mark 11:20
⁴ Mark 13:28
⁵ Mark 13:2
⁶ Mark 12:40

voluntarily accepts the full cost of humanity is the one whose life and death exposes the 'powers of this world'. Those baptised into his death and resurrection are called to do likewise.

So yes, Christian baptism is very much an adult task – as the promises quite clearly declare – though it's true that children learn a great deal about money and power from the adults around them. William's baptism today is desired by Jenny and Peter – for which we give thanks. As we all know, it will take William a lifetime to grow into the promises made on his behalf today – to 'reject evil' means to resist, reject, and transcend all systems of domination and control, to shape his life according to the way of Jesus the Christ.

And like us, this high calling will be sustained, encouraged and fuelled by the eucharistic banquet – and the Eucharistic community, we who individually and collectively labour together to walk in the way of the Christ.

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