

From Poverty to Riches

Mark 12:38-44

Do you ever sit, and watch people?

Like in a shopping centre, or at an airport, when you are waiting for someone? It's fascinating to see who walks by, who they are walking with, how they are dressed, what they are carrying, whether they are in a hurry or not, what's in parcels that they carry.

Jesus did some "people watching" in the Temple in Jerusalem in today's Gospel reading from Mark 12.

"He (Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury."

What did he see?

"Many rich people put in large sums." Yes, we can imagine who they were — temple leaders, leaders in society, maybe Zacchaeus (or other tax collectors).

But then we read, "A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny." What a contrast: the rich giving much (*large sums* we are told); and the poor widow finding only two small coins, giving *little*.

What are we to make of this little event that happened when 'Jesus sat and watched people in the Temple'? More to the point, what did Jesus want to teach his listeners then, and what does he want to teach us today?

It is very easy for us to look at this story and force ourselves to re-examine our giving to the church. Do we give in the offering each Sunday, the 'left-over money' from our wealth, (or even set aside a tithe/a tenth of our income, like Jewish requirements); or do we do what the poor widow did, and give 'all that we have'?

That would be absurd! Is that really what Jesus is wanting to teach his listeners, and us? Let us look at what Jesus says after "calling his disciples" over to listen to him.

'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 she had to live on.'

Everything. That is amazing! That is incredible — maybe it is even silly! For now she has *nothing*. Is that what Jesus is commending? Is that what he is teaching his listeners, and us? That we are to give *everything* we have? [Does this remind us of another recent story, "The Rich Young Man", back in Mark chapter 10? Jesus says to him, "Go, sell *all that you have* and give it to the poor."]

Jesus certainly wants to *challenge* his listeners, and us as well, to re-think what we *think* and especially what we *do* in our lives.

We need to look around this story though, to find some answers. Before Jesus sat and ‘people watched’ in the Temple, it says he *taught*. And what he taught was a very stern *warning!*

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Jesus is challenging their (and our) thinking and doing. “Be careful of outward appearance and behaviour, even in the Temple (or church)! *And* how are you treating the poor and the widows, the vulnerable in society?!”

Jesus had earlier entered Jerusalem (on Palm Sunday), and immediately gone to the Temple to clean it out of the bad practices that were happening. Now, still *in* the Temple, he is teaching that the hearts of those who use it are *not* in the right place. In fact, they are *not* looking after the very people that the Temple treasury was set up to look after, that is the poor and the widows. They were more interested in making a ‘show’ of their giving!

How “shameful” that a poor widow has to give “everything she has” when she comes into the Temple, past the Treasury!! Jesus is not commending her for her ‘generosity’, but rather lamenting the fact that she has to give anything at all, let alone *everything* she has — as all the rich and important people watch her!!

Then, after Jesus and the disciples leave the Temple (Mark 13), one of the disciples says, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” Jesus replies with a ‘bombshell!’ “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Jesus is trying to teach his listeners, and us, that the things of this world that we see, and the things we set up as important even in our churches, are only temporary, and they are *not* the most important things we should be focussing on. Jesus is part of God’s Plan for something better! Our relationship with God, with Jesus, is most important. This is what is to be the richness and wealth of our lives.

King David wrote in Psalm 51:17, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

I’d like to think that the poor widow, who probably came with a heavy heart, a broken spirit, sad and worried, left the Temple that day still trusting that God would provide for her needs in the future, whatever they were (even if the staring Temple people would not support her).

This poor widow’s offering also points to the greatest offering of all, an offering which was also made out of poverty. When God’s Son left the wealth and richness of his Father’s glory in heaven to come to this world (as we will soon be celebrating at Christmas), he became a poor human being. When Jesus hung on the cross, beaten, bruised and bloody, this was the greatest depth of human poverty, misery and suffering for the Son of God to endure. But in this humble poverty was the greatest treasure the human race will ever have — the very love of God!

The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 13:4 “Sure, Christ was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him to serve you”. Paul connected himself to Christ’s weakness, his poverty. As a result, he found the strength,

the power, the riches, to serve others as his offering to God. He had learnt the secret that if you stay close to the poverty of Jesus, you will always have lots to give, and that your offerings will never run out.

Paul also writes in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "You know the grace shown by our Lord Jesus Christ. Even though he was rich, he became poor to help you. Because he became poor, you can become rich."

The poverty of Christ gives us strength to serve, to make our life an offering to God. It is often when we are the least confident, when we are most aware of our lack of holiness, when we feel we have nothing to give, that God surprises us, and uses us for his plans. When we are forced to rely on God in prayer, when we can do no more than cling to God's promises as we read his Word, when all we can say is "Lord, have mercy", then it is that words will be given to us, our prayers answered, and solutions found to the problems that surface in our lives.

And now to come to Laura's Baptism: What an amazing event that we witnessed today! An event of such seeming 'simplicity' — just some ordinary Melbourne water and a few spoken words. *But*, in following Jesus' command to "baptise disciples of all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and through the blessing of a loving God, Laura has accumulated "riches and wealth" beyond measure.

Firstly, Laura has been welcomed into God's family — you are kidding me!?!? How can that happen? She has nothing much to present before God, no "royal background". She cannot come to God and say, "God look at me. Look at who I am and what I have done. Surely you can see I am worthy to become part of your family, to become Jesus' sister." Yet even so, God says to her, "Laura Ella, you are my own daughter. I made you who you are. I am pleased with you. And I really love you!" Amazing — that is God speaking to her (and to you and me as well!).

Secondly, as part of God's family, Laura has all the "riches, wealth and blessings" that go with it. As a child of "sinful parents"(!), "sinful grandparents", a "sinful great-grandmother", "sinful aunties and uncles and friends", Laura could be in big, *big* trouble! God in heaven does *not* like sin, and punishes it!! However, Laura's Baptism joins her together with her 'big brother Jesus' in both his death (to pay the penalty for sinfulness) and his resurrection (to show that sin, death and the devil are powerless over her, just as they were powerless over Jesus). Now she can live *life* to the fullest, knowing that Jesus has paid the price for her sinfulness — she is a "forgiven child of God".

Romans 6:3-11 says, "All of us were baptized into Christ Jesus. Don't you know that we were baptized into his death? By being baptized, we were buried with Christ into his death. Christ has been raised from the dead by the Father's glory. And like Christ we also can live a new life. By being baptized, we have been joined with him in a death like his. So we will certainly also be joined with him in a resurrection like his. That's because those who have died have been set free from sin. In the same way, consider yourselves to be dead as far as sin is concerned. Now you believe in Christ Jesus. So consider yourselves to be alive as far as God is concerned."

And in Romans 8:14-17, we read, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. The Spirit you received doesn't make you slaves. Otherwise you would live in fear again. Instead, the Holy Spirit you received made you God's adopted child. By the Spirit's power we call God 'Abba'. Abba means 'Father'. The Spirit himself joins with our spirits. Together they tell us that we are God's children. As his children, we will receive all that he has for us. We will share what Christ receives."

Finally, being part of God's family is not just here on earth. God's family is all those who have gone to be with him in heaven already — those who believed and trusted that Jesus was their Saviour, King and Shepherd. So Laura has heavenly 'real estate' as well. Sure, she lives here in Kilsyth, in a little home with her parents. But Jesus promises us (in John 14) that Laura has a place in heaven waiting for her, just like for all of us who believe in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says in John 14:1-3, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. Believe in me also. There are many rooms in my Father's house. If this were not true, would I have told you that I am going there? Would I have told you that I would prepare a place for you there? If I go and do that, I will come back. And I will take you to be with me. Then you will also be where I am."

May all these riches that our Saviour Jesus gained for all believers, be your certainty and assurance as you live your life serving all those you meet this week. Amen.