

Bless be the Name of God

The gospel reading this morning gives us the delightful coincidence of two moments in the teaching life of Jesus, one about self-importance and the other about money. The delightful part of this pairing is that they should come to our attention the Sunday following the national and local elections. Self-importance and money. Heard a good deal about both in recent days. These recent instances notwithstanding, Jesus has something else to say about each.

The first of this pair of “moments” is sufficiently delicious that it needs to be read again. It’s about self-understanding, something about which Jesus has some pretty clear views. What Jesus values it not what he sees in the person and conduct of the scribes.

“Beware of the scribes,” he says, “who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. They will receive the great condemnation.”

What fun! Our man Jesus, unloading on his detractors. But beyond enjoying the sheer nastiness of this and admiring Jesus’ painfully graphic description, what then? Why is he so exercised?

Clearly, the behavior he is deriding is behavior he does not want his followers to emulate. Don’t act like these folks, he says. He has offered them another model.

[In what Jesus says right here, about the Scribes, Jesus, a Jew, is deriding the scribes, other Jews. This description is completely intra-mural, only Jews involved.]

In another context, Jesus also admonished his followers against self-importance. There is a story that two of his disciples were urging their own preferment in the sight of Jesus—actually it was their mother doing the urging. In any case, Jesus rebuffed the pleadings for preferred seating by saying, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave...” [Mt 20.25-28] Here is a stark contrast to what Jesus sees in the actions of the scribes. Other instances could be provided but none more straightforward than this, “whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.”

In our recent and interminable political circus, there was the occasional reference to this country as a Christian nation, either as a historical reference or as a desirable aspiration. It got me thinking. Without engaging the historical fallacy of this suggestion about the past, I considered the prospect of “a Christian nation” as if a desirable aspiration. In my pondering, I did not imagine that in this anticipated condition, everyone would be a Christian. Rather I began to think that in such a society, principals near the heart of Jesus would characterize the social fabric. Then, of course, I asked, “What sort of norms or standards would emerge and show themselves?”

Loving relationships would be the norm. The dispossessed would be respected and seen to, like the widows to whom Jesus refers twice this morning. The sick would be well treated, the prisoners visited and the naked clothed. The hungry would be fed. Violence would be abhorred and generosity would characterize our social exchange. We would expect disagreements to be reconciled and it would be so. [If you have a grievance against you brother or sister, leave your gift at the altar and go, be reconciled, then come and offer your gift.]

If we were to live in the shadow of a prophet, we would expect love and justice to inform all our social policies and would inform any strategy for setting things right. We would structure our fiscal policy such that the last would be first and the first last. [I once suggested that this teaching of Jesus required a circle for accurate expression.]

There would be no place for arrogance, as seen in the conduct of the scribes, and there would be no place for selfishness of any sort. Strangers would be welcome and strangers no more, and a generous heart would characterize both personal and cultural dealings. In the mall, next to the water fountains, there would be devices dispensing forgiveness. And so it would go.

It didn't take long for me to admit to myself the pragmatic folly of my vision but I share it with you, nonetheless.

The second “moment” of teaching in our gospel has to do with money. The story Mark tells is a familiar one and a good one for this morning.

I'm particularly struck by the way Mark begins. “[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched...” He was watching the procession of people who came to put money in the treasury. Many rich people, likely associated in Jesus' mind with the scribes he has just spoken about, rich people contributing to the welfare of the temple from their wealth. Flowing robes and all, giving of their abundance.

But Jesus spies a woman, poor, dispossessed, presumably a widow, emptying her purse of its meager contents, “everything she had,” Jesus says. Even in her poverty, she is generous, sacrificial.

There is another instance where Jesus endorses giving away everything. You'll remember the rich young man who came to Jesus asking how he might inherit eternal life. Follow the commandments,

Jesus said. The young man said he did that but needed to know what else. Matthew, Mark and Luke all report what Jesus said in reply, "...go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." [Mk 10.21]

Clearly, none of us would choose Jesus to manage our investments! But, you see, that's just the point. This One whom we have chosen to follow; this One to whom we have promised allegiance and dedication; he is the one for whom sacrifice will become descriptive in his own life and he offers that to his companions. That is, he offers this to us.

To put this another way, what Jesus commends here is imprudence, extravagance. What he holds up for us to see is that the widow gave away "all she had to live on." What is this widow, this dispossessed person, doing?! She is relying entirely on the generosity of God. Imprudent, extravagant, counter intuitive, contrary to good monetary practice, foolish, yet given to us as an example.

We, in our parish, are just now concluding our financial promise-making for the coming year. It is a process our Bishop has called "the annual begathon!" You have no idea how often the poor generous widow attends these annual events! Her turning up this morning necessitates my telling you a story, about me, a story that may be oddly useful.

In my youth, all of us children were given Mite Boxes. We knew that the boxes were named in some way associated with the poor widow in this story. We knew "widow's mite." In those earlier years, the coins that the widow put in the collection box were called "mites," hence widow's mite, hence mite boxes.

However, to my innocent ears, when I heard of the widow's "mite," I heard widow's "might." Instead of associating this action with the widow's poverty and her coins, I thought of the widow's strength. That made whatever I put in that little box, rather powerful. This gave my few coins "might." Strangely enough, at the distance of some 60 odd years, that's a pretty useful misunderstanding.

So, from the gospel of Jesus, he gives us a lesson in self-understanding and the grace of this poor strong widow. Since the pledging season continues, I urge those of you who have yet to pledge, to do so aided in whatever way by these two teachings from Jesus.

For my part, I am more than glad to be in this place with you, to urge you on in our common life, to bid your generosity. I can testify to you that the parish of which we are a part is a faithful instrument of God's good intentions, hospitable, welcoming and mindful of the world that surrounds us. Be thankful for that!

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