

## Contexts

### Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, who is truly rich: the person who has great wealth or the one who is rich in the sight of God, etc.

### Mark 12:38-44 – things to notice

- There are two parts to this Sunday's gospel. Jesus and the disciples are in Jerusalem. On the journey to Jerusalem Jesus has been teaching the disciples about rejecting power, wealth and position, the true meaning of 'greatness' and humble service (giving up one's life).
- Notice the contrast between last Sunday's scribe and the scribes mentioned here.
- Scribes – these are a certain class of scribes (lawyers) who made their living by being trustees of the estates of unprotected people such as widows. Making a great show of their 'religiosity' was one way of getting the widows' business. A woman could not act in law by herself.
- Note the contrast between the false (showy) piety and the actions of the scribes in 'swallowing up the property (houses) of the widows' – that is, making their living off the poor and defenceless.
- Scribes are also criticised for wanting places of honour (remember James & John??) and to be greeted obsequiously and for their fine dress.
- Reference to the sentence they will receive – these lawyers will receive a stiff condemnation at the last judgement.
- Second story is about a poor widow.
- Why does Mark include both these stories together?
- Mark contrasts the widow's conduct with that of the scribes.
- Jesus praises her dedication and generosity – she gives her all – everything she has.
- Perhaps a reference to Jesus giving his all on the Cross. Perhaps a sign of the widow's devotion and trust in God, OR:
- Perhaps the widow has nothing more to give because she is a victim of one of the lawyers Jesus criticises. Perhaps the scribes (using the weight of religious

argument) have persuaded her to give to the Temple the last coins she had to live on.

- Contrast between those who give from what they have left over and those who give everything – another passion reference? OR: perhaps this is what true disciples do.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

We are approaching the end of the Liturgical Year. Jesus teaches the disciples and the large crowd as they follow him into Jerusalem and on the way to crucifixion.

The first reading recounts the story of another poor widow, a Sidonian woman and worshipper of the pagan fertility god, Baal. Because she shows great kindness to Elijah (a foreigner) even though she is down to the last of her food, she is rewarded by God with an endless supply of oil and flour.

### Reflection

Our readings this weekend should shape our response to those in need. It is two widows who show us the way to live according to the mind and heart of God.

The first reading tells of a poor widow's generosity to Elijah the prophet. Even though she was down to her very last portion of food, which she was saving for her son and herself, she was prepared to share it with Elijah. Her reward was a never-ending supply of flour and oil.

The same generosity is shown by the widow (but not by the scribes) in the Gospel. Her dedication and generosity in the midst of her poverty was a real sacrifice.

The widow is a contrast to the wealthy scribes who parade around in long robes and make a show of lengthy prayers. Jesus condemns them for their insincerity, their use of religious show to enhance their status and their unjust exploitation of widows.

Jesus does not want his disciples imitating the showy religiosity of the corrupt scribes, but rather the sincerity and generosity of the widow who gave 'her all' just as Jesus will shortly give 'his all' on the Cross. It is a reinforcement of the messages about 'coming to serve, not to be served' which have dominated the last 4 weeks of readings.

The way of Jesus is not about show, but about sincere dedication and generosity in our service of God and one another. Remember the contrasting stories about James & John and Bartimaeus over the last couple of weeks.

Following Christ is not about giving the 'left overs' but giving everything. The two widows gave all they had to live on. Jesus will give his life for our salvation.

It is the kind of dedication and selfless generosity we see in people who put their own lives at risk while attempting to rescue others from disaster. Disciples are called to give all in their following of Jesus and in their generous service of others.