

11th November 2013 – *Pentecost + 24*
1 Kings 17:8-16, Ps 146, Heb 9:24-28, Mk 12:38-44
07:30 & 09:30 Grahamstown Cathedral

As many of you know, my time in Grahamstown is coming to an end. My fiancée, Heather, and I are sad to be leaving Grahamstown and particularly this Cathedral community. However, the sadness is mingled with excitement and joy as we plan our wedding and prepare to move into the little cottage which the Natal diocese provides for us. We have already accumulated quite a lot of ‘stuff’, most recently we were given a biscuit coloured leather lounge suite... we are both delighted that we won’t have to sit on the floor of our little lounge.

Planning a wedding and moving into a new home costs money! There are budgets that need to be drawn up and a hundred and one things which need to be bought. In short it is quite easy to become rather obsessed and mesmerized with money... especially as we now have the friendly reassuring face of Nelson Mandela smiling back at us. The Gospel text therefore came as a rather sobering reminder. Traditionally the widow who gives everything has been held up as the ideal of Christian giving.

From the earliest times the Christian disciple has been called to poverty. Basil of Cappadocia for example instructs his catechumens – those preparing to be baptised – with these words: “Not only should we not endeavour to increase our possessions and acquire greater gains, as do men of the world, but we should not even lay claim to the property which has already been acquired and is our own. Let us be zealous in giving to the needy... including hostile and wicked men in our acts of kindness.” Basil’s repeated emphasis is that baptism requires a radical sort of poverty on the part of the baptised. This was regarded as the norm for all baptised people.

The sad reality is that, somehow over time, this kind of Christian poverty has been reserved for monks and nuns and other 'super' Christians. Aidan Kavanagh, the well know Jesuit says: "The fact remains, however, that what we have come to regard in many different ways as a theology of the Religious life was for Basil the great and the early Christian fathers simply a consequence of everyone's baptism, and the specialities of later religious orders were originally the rights and property of all the baptized."

At this point it may be helpful to define exactly what is meant by Christian poverty. Albert Nolan, who is himself a Dominican monk, asserts that the so called vow of poverty is a bit of a misnomer. Monks and nuns do not solemnly promise to God that they will be poor, needy and destitute. Rather, they want their lives to be a prophetic witness against the scandal of poverty and the sickness of greed. Nolan goes on to say that the vow of poverty is really a promise to share everything with others in the community. In other words Christian poverty is really another way speaking about a commitment to sharing.

But the widow in the gospel text is literally poverty stricken, there is no sense of sharing here, she gives everything she has – her whole life savings for the upkeep of the Jerusalem temple. She is surely generous. But is she generous to a fault? Does Jesus really approve of her action? Generally the poor widow has been praised for her generosity, but perhaps this is actually an occasion for lament. Jesus purposefully contrasts the greed of the scribes who profit from the suffering of others with the widow who is a victim of this kind of religious exploitation. In this way Jesus is not praising the widow's generosity but rather illustrating the dangers of institutional religion which has manipulated a generous woman into parting with what little she has.

Our current economy is structured similarly, in that it serves money and not people. We are all, to greater and lesser degrees entangled in an idolatrous financial structure, over which we seem to have very little power or control. This kind of sinister economic structure was highlighted in this Friday's edition of Grocotts, in an article called 'The darker side of debt'. The author, Geoff Embling highlighted that Ubank is owned by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and then exposed the consequences in these words:

The Union encourages strikes while Ubank rubs its hands together with glee. Then the [*mineworkers who are really*] pawns strike, don't get paid and borrow more money from Ubank. Or alternatively, workers' salaries rise and they pay off money to Ubank and borrow more. NUM and Ubank win either way, and the greedy circle just happens to fuel itself!

This is just one of a plethora of examples that we could choose from. We could also cite the story of our former minister of defence, Lindiwe Sisulu, in the Mail and Guardian. This story exposed how taxpayers forked out 40 million for the minister of defence to charter ultra-luxury Gulfstream jets as her personal taxi service.

These and other sinful economic structures are the greatest scandal of our time. How can it be that hunger, poverty and destitution abound in an ocean of excessive and pretentious wealth? Our church fought the injustice of Apartheid, but we have been slow in responding to the economic injustice of greed, gluttony and exploitation. The zeitgeist of our time says: "It's mine. I earned it or inherited it. It is all legal. I have a right to accumulate as much as I like, no matter how many children are dying of hunger." That dear friends is not only immoral – it is utterly obscene!

It is easy to point fingers at the sickly spirit of our age and pick out Ubank and corrupt Government officials who are complicit in sinful economic structures. I find it tempting to settle smugly into the warm glow of self-righteousness that inevitably follows exposing the truth like this. But is the church any different? Our Bishops may not charter gulfstream jets, but they certainly do a lot of flying across the country. The Archbishop himself raised the issue after his flight to New Zealand for the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council recently. And what of us clergy who spend a fortune on our elaborate vestments? Should we own vestments, or should the vestments belong to the church to be shared with all?

A little later the liturgy will move into the offertory, during which time we will have the opportunity to worship by giving money. The offertory was not always taken up in this form. Early Christians literally offered food and drink for the Eucharist which in earlier times consisted of a full meal. The food and drink was shared by all and in this way the rich literally provided for the poor.

Apparently human nature kicked in, because Paul criticizes the Corinthians for not sharing at their Eucharist's – some got drunk while others went hungry. This problem resulted in the meal being ritualized to a sip of wine and a fragment of bread. This new system meant that the poor no longer received a meal and so a new kind of offertory was introduced. Initially people brought bread to be distributed to the poor, as time went by it became easier to give money which was used to buy food for the poor.

Does our offertory still fulfil this purpose of helping the poor and needy or does the lion's share of our collection go to supporting our institutional religion? The liturgist, Gordon Lathrop writes about the offertory in this way: "Take a collection for the hungry and the poor. Of course, you will also have to find money for the maintenance of your building and your staff, but if that is all you do, especially if you call it by the religious term 'offering', you will be undermining the [liturgy]... Consider finding another way to gather money for your bills, perhaps some new version of the old 'church dues', but let the Christian ritual collection exist to be entirely given away."

I think it is appropriate to end with the section of scripture that follows directly after our text of the greedy scribes and the generous widow: "And as Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

I love the majesty of this Cathedral and its aesthetic beauty, especially now that the richness of our wooden floors has been revealed. But this building, like the Sabbath, was made to serve us. The greater condemnation is reserved for us who love the bricks of this place more than we love the living stones sitting around us and the mass of starving humanity beyond these walls.