

*1 Kings 17.8 - 16, Hebrews 9.24 - 28, Mark 12.38 - 44.*

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in the market-places, to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!" Jesus certainly seems to be on the war-path here against a certain style of institutional religion, and although his target here was the Temple administration in Jerusalem, from the money-changers to the chief priests and scribes, we need to consider what his words have to say to the "scribes" of today - not journalists and writers, but those of us who presume to preach and teach in His Name.

It's not so much clerical robes that offend him, I'd say, though I'd be happy enough to stand here in my everyday clothes. It's the scribes' assumption that they are to be honoured and respected without question. That doesn't sit well with the central command to love God and our neighbour; it doesn't sit well with Jesus warning that "he who wants to be great among you must be the servant of all", or with his "many who are first shall be last and the last first" - (and as to the first being last, it's a bit ironic, isn't it, that in church processions we take care to see that the most senior clergy present walk at the end of the line!)

Perhaps, pondering all this, one of the things that most alienates people from the Church nowadays is an authoritarianism which refuses servanthood. That can happen at parish level just as well as on a diocesan or provincial one. We hear more and more talk about "mission"; but what draws people into the life of the Church is not persuasion or preaching or programmes; it's receiving God's love, however undeserved, from those who worship him. It's being accepted unquestioningly as a member of God's family, imperfect though all of us are. That was certainly true for me half a lifetime ago - a move from hesitation on the edges to joyful involvement in the heart of a parish.

And let's be clear: while Jesus rejected the scribes as a group and warned against them, he had constructive conversations with individual scribes, like the one who agreed with him on the command to love God and neighbour. "You are not far from the kingdom of God", he told him. Jesus was never one to condemn individuals, but he did warn against destructive group characteristics. And we should take his warnings seriously two thousand years later.

Enough of the scribes for now, as we mark down a note to preachers, priests and pastors of all sorts, whether notable or not: "Humility is a virtue; arrogance is sin."

At the opposite pole of today's gospel we find a poor widow - poor but generous. (Widows in the Bible are invariably poor and unprovided for, along with any children they might have. There were no pensions in those days.) And this widow, in contrast to the rich people ostentatiously giving to the Temple treasury whatever they can spare, puts in her last two tiny coins - all that she had, commonly called "the widow's mite". We're not told if she survives physically, but it's implied that her reward will be great. She is the heroine of this passage - humble, generous and so much closer to God's self-giving love than the clever and rich people who think so much of themselves and expect admiration. We are called to be more like her and less like them. Let's think about that challenge and what it implies.

And she is not the only widow we have met this morning! Like her, the widow of Zarephath who feeds Elijah, is an example of the generosity of poor, perhaps starving people, and their challenge to us. The widow is preparing to eat the last of her food with her son and then die when Elijah asks her for a share of it. After giving it willingly, instead of dying with her son as she expects, she finds that somehow she always has enough to eat for the next day, and then the next, along with Elijah and the boy, whom Elijah subsequently rescues from death. Like the poor widow of the Gospel, she gives all she has without expecting any return. She's rewarded with more than she could have hoped for.

Do we behave like these poor widows? Or like the rich people giving no more than they can easily spare? At this time when to save our very planet, massive spending - and all round sacrifice of immediate convenience - is required, our answer to this question has enormous, incalculable implications. A radical change of heart may be needed - or at the very least a rigorous re-ordering of our priorities.

Getting back to Elijah for a moment, you might remember that it was after saving the widow's child from death that this greatest of all the Old Testament prophets went on to challenge and destroy the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel - a striking parallel, in its way, to Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. Both Elijah and Jesus dramatised God's rejection of false religion, or decadent religiosity, in Israel. And in unforgettable scenarios.

Might we, too, need to be jolted away from decadent religiosity? If not, why is it that so many good and thoughtful people nowadays declare themselves "spiritual but not religious", having found more dogmatism than inspiration, more

control than illumination, more formality than loving-kindness in the religious gatherings they have attended? Why is it that a recently retired clergy friend of mine, admittedly in another part of the country, confessed to me recently that in the five months since leaving his parish he had been to church maybe five times, and wished each time that he hadn't bothered? If the church can no longer speak to committed Christians, what hope do we have of attracting the young people and seekers of today?

These questions face us at a time when Christian faith has been rapidly losing its mojo. A "me first", "I want my rights" culture has come to dominate society, and religious observance has shrunk, often becoming more a formality than a passion. This may have something to do with our failure to take on the necessary dialogue with science and to help each other see the Bible as inspiring story and symbol, as revelation that is profound - but not a claim to factuality at every level. It also surely has to do with a failure to live out the love command that is central to Christian faith. Loving God - however we imagine or experience God - is not enough. We must also love one another, all God's beloved children and all God's creation, as we love ourselves - or indeed more, like those poor widows who in their simple way point us to Christ's gift of his life for us on the cross. It is through loving our neighbour that God's love is made known. So beloved, let us love one another, imperfect as we are, for love is of God, and perfect love casts out fear. In the name of the One who came from God to enfold us in his love. Amen.

*Canon Ginnie Kennerley 7.11.'21.*