**THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**

**7th November 2021**

**Reading I: 1 Kings 17:10-16**

Elijah and Elisha were prophets from the 6th Century B.C. but all we have about them are legends of their miracles. To-day’s tells of the miraculous feeding which saved a widow and her son from starvation which was a common cause of death then. Sidon (modern Saida) was a coastal town in Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) which means that the woman was not even Jewish.

In Israeli tradition the Elijah stories were used to emphasize the power of God's word. This then justified the use of promises and threats held over the people to make them toe the line.

But we use the story to-day differently. The spotlight falls on the anonymous widow. She took the prophet at his word, and a never-ending supply of flour and oil became hers. She is evidence of the Lord’s concern for Jews and non-Jews alike. She stands out as one of the poor of the Lord, one of those who place all their trust in him, despite poverty and oppression. These formed a recognised group in Israeli society called ‘anawim’

The story thus establishes a genre which was later to contain the feeding miracles of Jesus. This is their main value for the New Testament in general but not to-day. To-day it provides an example of sacrifice which is repeated in the Gospel story. The widow and her son gave all they had to the man of God, and received all they needed in exchange. In the Eucharistic lectionary the incident becomes a neat comment on today's gospel story.

**Responsorial Psalm: 146:6c-10**

This is a psalm from a collection in which God is praised for his loving-kindness toward the ‘anawim’ including widows. Hence its selection here.

**Reading II: Hebrews 9:24-23**

This reading continues the exposition of the high priestly work of Christ in terms of a series of contrasts with the Levitical priesthood. Taking phrases from the Missal, we look at ...........

*man-made sanctuary* The author has in mind the Jerusalem temple which was only a copy of the heavenly one. It was still incomplete at the time of its destruction, around the date of this writing.

*year after year* The author is thinking of the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) when the High Priest atoned for his own sins before he could speak for the people.

*blood that is not his own* Blood was a sign of life and not death. The High Priest could only offer an animal’s blood while Christ could offer his own.

*he has made his appearance once and for all* The author is still thinking of Yom Kippur when after the offering, the Priest would appear before the people to let them know that the offering had been made. So, when Christ next appears, it will be to announce the Judgement.

Hebrews uses three images to express the work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. He has earned access to the presence of God before whom he pleads our cause and with whom obtains reconciliation. (vv. 23-26) The reading concludes the course from Hebrews.

**Gospel: Mark 12:38-44 (long form); 12:41-44 (short form)**

The longer form of this gospel combines two quite distinct stories: Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and the episode of the widow with two coins.

Writing was a trade, as Paul was a tentmaker and Joseph a carpenter and Peter a fisherman. If anyone needed a letter, they would employ a scribe, even to the extent of composing the letter. The scribes were the literate and educated class to a far greater degree than to-day because so much had to be memorised. Scrolls were difficult to access and whole books could be quoted from memory. It was the Christian practice of looking up references that led to the development of the Codex with one spine as in our modern books.

Jesus’ incisive criticism of the scribes forms the conclusion to the series of Jerusalem conflict stories. Their function was to show the widening gulf between Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities, and so to prepare the way for the Sanhedrin's decision to get rid of Jesus.

It may be that the two stories were linked because they both contain the word widow, while also contrasting the approved and unapproved behaviour. Also, Mark has located the conflict in the temple, and the story of the widow is also naturally located there.

Whether by design or not, however, the two stories, taken together in this way, provide a foil for one another, for the behaviour of the scribes is contrasted sharply with that of the widow. Perhaps the story of the widow was used in catechesis to illustrate the duty of almsgiving.

Censure of the scribes (vv. 38-44). The scribes prided themselves on their theological learning and cultivated envy by adopting distinctive dress. The 'best seats' in the synagogue: directly in front of the ark containing the sacred scrolls and facing the people. In the 18th century Church of England private box pews similarly filled the nave but in the 21st century, the only people still in distinctive dress are the clergy!!!

However, it should be pointed out that the dress of the clergy comes from the common dress of ancient times. The outer Mass vestment (Chasuble) was once the ordinary walking out dress of a gentleman. As fashions changed, so the Church retained the traditional styles.

The charge in v.40 is more serious. Not only do scribes make an ostentatious display of long-winded prayer, they are shown to be greedy and exploiters of the helpless. Judaism has some scathing condemnation of unscrupulous scribes. However, the sweeping character of the charges here reflects the animosity between the Church and official Judaism, an animosity even more trenchantly expressed in Matthew 23.

This portrait of the scribes stands, and is meant to stand, in sharp contrast to the attitude and conduct of Christian religious leaders (9:33-37; 10:42-45). But what has been, and continues to be, the reality in the Church? Distinctive dress, signs of deference, places of honour at religious and civic functions! It is not easy to see much difference between our attitudes and the conduct of the scribes censured here in vv. 38-39.

The 'copper coin' (lepton) was the smallest in circulation. Mention of two coins is important: the woman could have kept one for herself. Wealthy people had been generous (v. 41); yet this poor widow's mite is an immeasurably greater gift than theirs for she has given of her all - her 'whole living' (v. 44). She had let go of every shred of security and had committed herself wholly to God.

Such is the traditional interpretation of the passage. But we may, and most likely should, view it in a different light. Would Jesus really have approved of a poor widow giving 'out of her poverty ... all she had to live on'? Hardly. His castigation of the scribes as those who 'devour widows' houses' is surely more realistic.

This poor widow is a victim of the religious establishment. She had been convinced that it was a 'holy' thing to give her all to the Temple. She is a tragic example of the opposite of what Jesus urged: 'Religion is for men and women, not men and women for religion.'