

## **Mark 12<sup>38–44</sup>**

*Cathedral Church of Christ the King, Ballarat*

*10<sup>th</sup> November, 2024*

This morning's gospel reading includes a brief episode during one of Jesus' visits to the Temple in Jerusalem. He was teaching a large crowd when he observed a very commonplace thing happening. Nobody else seems to have noticed, but Jesus did, and drew an important lesson for the people listening to him. It is, of course, the little story we refer to as the "Widow's Mite". Widows in those days were totally marginalised by the rest of the community. Jesus notices that this particular one goes to the collection boxes that were scattered throughout the Temple precinct. Like everyone else, she puts in her offering, but hers is tiny.

We refer to this as the Widow's Mite because in the King James Bible it says that she put into the collection two mites. What is a mite? It was the smallest value coin known to the translators of the KJV. Interestingly, mites were not even English coins. The smallest English coin in those days was the farthing, but to emphasise the point the translators use the smallest coin they knew of, which was used in northern Europe. This was the mite, and it was worth half a farthing. Half a farthing was the equivalent of what would now be about 5 Australian dollars.

Jesus had been teaching the crowd about what constitutes real faith in God. He warned them: don't imitate the religious leaders. They stride about, wanting to be admired and honoured for their flowing robes and lengthy prayers. They think that their piety permits them to extort belongings from the poorest of the poor, including widows. This, Jesus says, is not true faith at all. If you want to exercise real faith, follow the example of this widow. She has quietly, and without any show, humbly given all that she has to live on. She is a shining example of a truly godly life.

What does Jesus mean by this? I have heard a few interpretations of this story that rather miss the point. One is that faith is all about donating money: in modern terms, Jesus is teaching us about putting money into the church collection plate or perhaps donating to a Christian charity. Yes, that is the context in which this little incident takes place, but I believe Jesus is talking about much more—actually, about how we live the whole of our lives.

Another misinterpretation is that Jesus praises the widow because she gave a much higher proportion of her possessions than rich people. If that were what he were saying, then we could do some calculations. If I put, say, 20% of my income into the collection plate each week and you put in 10%, I am a better Christian than you: twice as good, in fact. Even if we don't go such twisted extremes, we could say that donating more is better than donating less. I don't disagree with that, but that is not what this story is about.

Finally, one or two friends have told me that they can't see Jesus' point. The two coins the widow put in were so small, they claim, as to be

worthless. And since in the verses immediately following our reading Jesus predicts that the Temple will soon be completely destroyed, what good would any money have been, let alone such a pathetic little amount?

These interpretations of this little scene all arise from focussing on money, and its value. But Jesus is focussing on something much more fundamental to our relationship with God.

According to my calculations, the widow had the equivalent of what for us is about \$10. Now that isn't much at all, but with very careful thought we could keep ourselves in food for a day or so. A loaf of bread, some cheese and a tomato or two, and we'd have a couple of meals of sandwiches. That would have been the widow's situation. She could have used her two mites to keep herself alive for a short while. But clearly she didn't think of them as **her** money: they belonged to **God**. He had graciously endowed her with these mites, and she wanted to respond to him in love. She gave them away to the Temple fund, that was intended to pay for the upkeep of this house of worship and in other ways to further God's work.

Yes, she was giving away her last chance to buy any food, but she completely trusted God to look after her, perhaps through some kind and caring, truly religious people, not the self-aggrandising teachers of the law. Her attitude was that everything she had, and she herself, were in God's hands. And quietly, without speaking or making a show, she gave herself and her belongings back to him with complete trust.

That, Jesus says, is true faith, not parading your piety in public, but living your life in total surrender to your relationship with God. That is the lesson we can learn today. Everything we have—our possessions, time, and talents, what we have gained from work and from life experiences—everything belongs to God. When we think about his gracious gifts, we feel love for him stirring within us. That motivates us to give them all back to him by using them however we can to serve him, by donating all we have to the service of other people.

We can donate money, yes: as much as possible, trusting completely in his gracious care to provide the necessities of life to us. But we can give time and concern to others, share with them the benefits of our abilities and of what we have learned of life. We can also ask God to make us aware of other ways in which we can live for others, and, through them, for him.

That is the true life of faith, Jesus taught. As the apostle James wrote:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.