

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 7 November 2021

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

Mark 12:38-44

The widow's offering

Mark 12:38-44 is divided into two – Jesus denounces the scribes in 38-40 and the widow's offering in 41- 44. In both passages, what it means to be 'poor' before God is illustrated in the lives of people – the scribes and the poor widow. We'll think about them one by one and what it means to us – the church today.

Scribes

The scribes and Jesus were in tension throughout Mark's Gospel from the beginning. They were in dispute with Jesus' authority to teach people that they didn't have.¹ The scribes often distrusted Jesus' various activities.² In return, Jesus and his disciples questioned the influence of scribal teaching.³ In the reading today, Jesus reveals scribes as those who only care for people's praise and their reputation while failing God. Here we notice the words that he used: they like to walk around in long robes, be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets, and say long prayers for the sake of appearance. All these words contribute to the good public images. From the scribes' point of view, Jesus' denouncement of them may be so harsh to bear.

Scribes had been doing important roles in biblical times. They were in demand to prepare copies of Israel's sacred literature on parchment scrolls. Many scribes devoted themselves to preserving and copying the scriptures. Scribes studied diligently. After the Exile, they not only supplied copies of the scriptures to the synagogues but also became teachers of the law, taking the place of the priests. Yet by denouncing them, Jesus plainly shows that even the experts of the law will not make themselves eligible to enter into the kingdom of God. Superior knowledge of scripture and outward piety are not helpful either unless they become poor before God.

¹ Mark 1:21

² Mark cf. 2:7, 16; 3:22; 7:1, 5 etc.

³ Mark 9:11; 12:35

Jesus especially describes scribes as those who devour widows' houses. The same word 'devour' is used in Mark 4:4, which refers to the birds who 'gobble up' the seed that the sower has thrown on the ground in the parable of the sower. As these birds are interpreted by Jesus as Satan, Jesus sees scribes in the same way who do not keep the law as they teach people. In this case, scribes are not spiritually poor before God.

The Widow

Now Jesus observes a poor widow. In scripture, widows are one of those who need support from the community together with aliens and orphans.⁴ Also, the poor stand under the special protection of God as they are those who are deprived of their inherited rights – land.⁵ Since the land itself stands under Yahweh's legal possession and has been given by him to the whole people, enduring poverty in Israel is not allowed according to the covenantal law. According to Deuteronomy, there should be no poor people in Israel as it makes comprehensive provisions for the poor. In the New Testament, two words are used to express 'being poor' – *penes* and *ptochos*. *Penes* refers to a person who does manual labour without the leisure of the rich. Yet, they are free to give their time to politics, education and war. A *ptochos*, however, refers to a person reduced to begging—someone who is destitute of all resources, especially farm and family. One gives alms to a *ptochos*.⁶ In the case of the widow, she is both – widowed and poor. She is materially poor as well as spiritually. Even so, she decides that her money, what little of it she has, belongs to God. In this passage, her offering is compared to the rich people's. But, her piety is also compared to the scribes' as her offering doesn't attract anyone's attention, but God's as the value of a gift depends on its significance for the giver. By saying about the widow's offering, Jesus re-evaluated things that are valued in the kingdom of God differently from those in wider society.⁷ That is, rich or poor, wise or foolish, the condition to be the citizens of God's kingdom is if we are poor – *ptochos* before God. It means total dependence on God in any life circumstance we are in.

The church

In our story time, we listened to the story titled, *Last stop on Market Street*. The question was what the most impressive thing in the story was. Answers vary. But from the theme – the

⁴ Deuteronomy 14:28-29

⁵ The poor (Heb. dal, 'ebyôn)

⁶ Regarding other examples of *ptochos*, see Matthew 5:3, 'poor in spirit,' and Luke 6:20 – Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God.

⁷ Luke 21:3

widow's offering – being poor before God, we may think a few things as follows. The story begins when CJ and his Nana come out of the church. Perhaps they attended a Sunday service. As the story unfolds, we are informed that they don't have a car. After church, they always go somewhere that CJ's friends don't. On the bus, CJ envies the other boys who have a smartphone and listen to music.

CJ has to walk on a dirty street to go to the place. They finally get to the soup kitchen, where they work as volunteers. Every time CJ complains about something, Nana gently nudges him to see the other side of things. It makes the rainy day a good day for trees; it makes the bus trip special. Her comments on seeing let him have a chance to listen to live music played by the blind man and so forth. They may not be better off getting a car or a smartphone. But CJ's Nana has a wonderful thing that money cannot buy – that is her loving heart through which everything – things or people alike - can be transformed into something meaningful and beautiful. Being poor before God lets us see humble and being ourselves who depend on God faithfully. It makes us see things differently from the perspectives of God, for whom everything looked good in creation. The widow's offering reminds us that the poor do not necessarily mean destitute people. The rich, the wise, the powerful can also be poor when they fail to be poor before God.

Presently the churches around the world are dealing with the new normal. Requirements for physical meetings under the new rules are continually changing. Business struggles and the future is uncertain. Under this new normal, the roles of the church as prophet, challenger and comforter in the society seem significantly diminished. However, there is one thing that no one can do except the church. That is proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and bearing the cross in every dimension of our lives. As if the poor widow could still put her offering in the treasury despite scribes' unlawful greed, as if CJ begins to see things differently through the eyes of Nana as they get to the soup kitchen, we too sow our small seeds of faith and hope in the world despite birds, thorns, and rocks or even becoming the laughing stock for the sake of the good news of Jesus Christ. In the end, we will say the same thing that CJ said – “we're glad we did!” May God help us contemplate the widow's offering in-depth so that we will be like her in keeping faith in Christ. Amen.