

Homily for The Thirty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (Remembrance Sunday)

Two of today's readings share the theme of the generosity of widows: Elijah is fed by the widow of Zarepath, who gives him the last of her food, and Jesus watches a widow put all she has into the Temple Treasury. It is worth stopping for a moment to consider these widows. We quite rightly feel a sense of compassion for them because they have lost their husbands; that is bad enough. But remember, in the pre-modern society where these stories originate they have lost a great deal more than that. They have also lost the person who puts food on the table and a roof over their heads, the person who provides for their everyday needs. They are no longer being supported by the work of their husband, they are dependent on whatever food they can scrape together through the goodness and generosity of others. Life is particularly precarious for them.

It is in this context that these two widows make their gifts, and we can see just how generous they are. The woman at the Temple gives away the last of her money - not just what she happens to have on her, but absolutely everything she has. She gives away her independence, and her meagre security. The widow of Zarepath gives to Elijah her last meal; she is sure that death will follow, not only for her but also for her son. This is more than a gift of food, it is a gift of herself because she has given him that which she hoped would keep her alive.

There is something rather compelling about these two stories. They are both very familiar, but we can recognise in them something rather beautiful. We can see in this generosity something that challenges very profoundly our own need for possessions and security. Somehow, in a world where everyone is just one bad harvest away from starvation, the sense of common humanity, of shared vulnerability, the sense that we are all in need of one another, seems much stronger than in our own comfortable world. Reading about these two widows one part of us wants to dismiss them as rash and foolish, or wasteful, and ask who will give them any help now if they just give it all away; but a deeper and wiser part of us feels envious, and wishes that we could be

as selfless. We recognise that in their actions there is something profoundly human, profoundly real and true, and therefore also deeply beautiful.

In fact, this theme is picked up in the reading from Hebrews, too. 'Christ offers himself' the author writes. The other priests offered sheep and birds, but Christ is the fullest sort of priest, and he offers himself. Once again, this seems at one level complete madness, but at another level it is deeply appealing. If we are told that someone has freely chosen to sacrifice themselves to save us, that leaves us feeling humble and overawed. The self-offering of Christ is perfect human love; that is, it is generosity that knows no limits, and fears nothing. This is beautiful and deeply touching; the reason that the story of today's two unnamed widows is so powerful, and so beautiful, is that it is a shadow of Christ's offering. There is something of the essence of real humanity, humanity lived to the full, humanity as we wish it could be in all of this, and it leaves us at the same time encouraged, because it is something so wonderful, and disheartened because it seems so hard to do, hard for ourselves and hard for others.

I must admit that I have struggled a little with what to say next. It would be very easy to slide easily into Remembrance Sunday here, and talk about people sacrificing their lives for their friends. I'm afraid I don't feel comfortable with that. I've seen too many young widows and orphans and bereaved parents to feel that there was anything beautiful about the deaths of their loved ones. I can't help thinking that Remembrance Sunday is all rather distasteful when it is sanitised and romanticised and overlaid with misty views of Arthurian gallantry. I strongly suspect that the reality is very different. With a few notable exceptions people do not lay down their lives at all, with all the connotations of tranquillity and acceptance that the phrase implies; no, I strongly suspect that for the most part their lives are wrenched from them violently, bloodily and horrifyingly, and that far from 'laying' anything down they fight with every fibre of their being for life. So I am not willing to equate the deaths of most of our fallen servicemen with the generosity of the widows. Indeed, the simple mention of the word widows should warn us against this. But there is something else in today's readings which can help us with Remembrance Sunday. We repeat these stories from the Bible year by year, we read them again and again, and we are aware that in the

repetition of stories that inspire us those stories become a part of us. The mere fact that we hear a story of a beautiful action again and again and again means that at a subconscious level that beautiful act ceases to be something strange and unfamiliar, but instead it becomes familiar, and possible. The very act of remembering helps to make us who we are. If we remember nothing of the past, we are cut off from our ancestors but we are also cut off from ourselves. How did I become the person I am? How did my country become the place that it is? How did the Church become what it is? Any family gathering or reunion of old friends is usually marked out by telling stories and anecdotes. The past that we share has made us who we are.

So, Remembrance Sunday is an occasion for rediscovering who we are as a nation. Those who want to ignore it, or distort it, are in danger of cutting themselves off from not only the past, but also the present. These deaths have made us who we are; every one of them has played a part in making us the people we are today, and with every coffin carried off a plane on the way back from Afghanistan we are changed. John Donne wrote 'Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in all mankind' (Meditation XVII) and it is right that we face up to, acknowledge, and internalise each one of these tragedies.

So, by all means let us read carefully the stories of the two widows in today's readings, and let us gaze in wonder at such truly human actions, such beautiful reflections of the self-giving of Christ. This is not only right, but essential. But don't let us be confused by this into romanticising death in conflict. The fallen deserve better, because they deserve us to be realistic. We honour them, we remember them, because somehow they have found their place in world history, and they have helped us be the nation and the world that we are. We cannot afford to forget them, because if we do so we forget who we are, and people who have forgotten who they are in danger not only of repeating history's mistakes, but of making them worse.