

## Sunday 32 B

Let us reflect for a moment on the lives of the people described in our first reading today from the first Book of Kings and from Mark's Gospel. In the first reading we meet Elijah who has announced to the evil king Ahab that no rain is going to fall in the land because of Ahab's sins. But God has promised Elijah that he will provide him with food and drink. And that is what happens in the section we have just read. Elijah goes to a city called Zarephath where he meets a widow who is suffering from the lack of rain. He asks her for water and a crust of bread. She explains to him that she has only a handful of flour in her jar and a little oil in her jug. She is going to use those to prepare a final meal for her son and herself. Then, she says, "when we have eaten it, we shall die." "What a world to live in," we might say to ourselves. But then we remind ourselves that it is the world we live in. People still go hungry. A week or so ago on the front page of the NY Times there was a horrible picture of a starving child held by her mother, her ribs sticking out. It was a child in Yemen, a country which has been bombed continually by the Saudis who have bought their bombs from us. So, sadly, we are connected to that child's hunger.

In our story the woman does what Elijah asks of her and is rewarded for her trust: her jar of flour does not become empty and her jug of oil does not run dry. The simple lesson is: if a person trusts in God, that trust will be rewarded.

Now our gospel story. It comes late in Mark's Gospel. Jesus will soon be arrested and put to death. He has come to Jerusalem and is now in the temple area, teaching. And he is teaching the people that they should beware of the scribes who wear long robes, accept greetings in the market-places, seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, and devour the houses of widows. Have we seen anyone like that recently? It makes me feel very uncomfortable, for we who wear Roman collars often receive such signs of respect from faithful Catholics. True, that happens less and less today, given the crisis in the priesthood these last eighteen years. Perhaps we priests should be grateful for this crisis, because we are less open to the dangers of clericalism, for that is exactly what the Lord is talking about in his description of the scribes—at least of some of them—of his day.

And now the contrast: the poor widow—maybe some smooth-talking scribe had devoured her house and possessions—comes into view as Jesus sits opposite the place where the people made

their contributions to the temple. There are many wealthy there who contribute a great deal. The poor widow has only two tiny coins—pennies—we might say, to throw in, but the Lord knows that she is giving all that she has and he considers that to be more than what the wealthy give, for, as he says, the wealthy have given a little out of their surplus, but she has given all that she had.

There is no doubt that the woman's heart is in the right place. She is living out the commandment that her fellow Jews recited every day, that they should love the Lord with all their hearts, with all their souls, with all their minds and with all their strength. But we might fault her thinking. We would advise her to save something for herself to live on. But if we had tried to tell her that, she would have told us that we were not trusting the Lord. Perhaps she was repeating to herself the phrase from the story about Elijah and the widow she had learned in reading the Scriptures: her jar of flour did not go empty, her jug of oil did not run dry. Like the widow in Elijah's time, this widow in Jesus' time was going to trust in the Lord completely.

Our world is still full of poor widows and the wealthy, and often the two do not meet, except indirectly, in the way in which we meet with the people of Yemen.

In his 2013 letter to us entitled “The Joy of the Gospel” Pope Francis quotes St. John Chrysostom who lived from 347 to 407 and was such a good preacher that he earned the name golden-mouthed. That is the meaning of the word chrysostom. Chrysostom wrote: “Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs.” What does that last sentence mean? I believe it means that everything in the world first belongs to everyone in the world, which is to say that before we divide things up into what is ours and what is yours, things belong to all of us. Therefore, even after they have been divided up, both their common origin and their common purpose remain. When we think of that and think of things like water and food and light, it all makes sense. I have a right to use water, but I cannot deny the fact that water as such belongs to all of us and must serve all of us and not just some of us.

Let us remember these two widows who lived the first commandment by trusting the Lord even when faced with absolute poverty, and let us remember Chrysostom’s admonition on the common purpose of all the world’s goods. If we do, the Lord will

smile rather than turn away from us when we tithe, that is, when we give one tenth of our income to charity.