

Pentecost Year B: 11 November 2012

Mark 12:38-44

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

We are approaching the end of our church year and coming towards the end of Mark's Gospel. Jesus is in Jerusalem and the story is increasingly revealing an intense clash between Jesus and the Temple authorities.

In the immediately preceding verses of the reading were heard tonight, Jesus deals with the question of which commandment is the first? Jesus puts the focus on love – love of God and love of neighbour. Jesus says that love is more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices.

The first commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. How does one show such love for God?

Well, let me offer an analogy for ONE way that people have dealt with this question. If the commandment had read – “Love football with all your heart, soul, mind and strength”, then how would one demonstrate one's love of football?

- go to games
- play the game
- cheer on your favourite team
- perhaps become a paid up member of the football club

I presume that the persons who gave the most money might be considered to be, in some ways, the ones who loved the game the most. Who knows, if one donated enough money then one might end up with a football club house named after oneself.

Presumably some of the same logic works in the temple. Jesus sits down by the temple treasury and watches the action. He sees many rich people putting in large sums. How does he know that they were putting in large sums? Presumably because they made a bit of a show of it – and why would people want to make a show of it?

Well, I guess it might be that by doing so, that people felt that they achieved an increased standing of some kind in the community. It might be that their sense of value in the world increased in proportion to the amount of value they put into the temple coffers.

Jesus doesn't criticise the rich giving large sums of money in any way – what he does is to re-direct attention to the giving of a poor woman who is put in just a couple of small copper coins – worth about a penny. There's generosity he says.

But at the same time he is critiquing the scribes – who are a central part of the religious establishment.

It's not only the wealthy who are shoring up their sense of self by making a public show of giving – the scribes do it in a different way. They strut around in flowing robes; they like the best seats in the synagogue; they like the places of honour at banquets; they like to say long impressive prayers.....but worst of all..... “they devour widows houses”? There is obviously some history behind this that we've lost access to, but one presumes that it has something to do with putting financial pressures on widows.

It is most likely that this poor widow had put in all that she had to live on not *just* because of her generosity but, we might wonder, because there was some kind of social pressure brought to bear by the scribes. The temple, which was designed first and foremost for connection with God, had actually become a place of exploitation of the poor.

Jesus and particularly the Jesus portrayed in Mark's Gospel, has a very acute sense of the risks inherent in large religious systems. For Jesus, BIG is not better. In contradiction to a strong theme in his own Jewish tradition Jesus is saying, quite radically, that it is *not* blessed to be rich.....rather, *to be poor is to be blessed*.....I'm not talking her about poverty as crippling starvation, which the prophets clearly speak against....Gospel poverty is a poverty of Spirit which is grateful and generous with what one has.

True poverty of Spirit is also rooted in knowing that one's identity comes from God and not from other people. If we are quietly confident in our identity *in God* then we don't need to be shoring up a false identity in the eyes of other people.

If we cast our mind back over key passages in Mark's Gospel we see this as a constant pattern in Jesus' teaching:

For example:

The scribes like to say long prayers	but Jesus tells his followers when they pray to lock themselves away in their room and pray in secret (Mk 6:5)
The scribes like places of honour at banquets	but Jesus is not concerned about his honour when he eats with tax collectors and sinner (Mth 11:19)
the disciples constantly fail to understand	but Blind Bartimaeus is able to say, “Lord have mercy” and thereby show that he can actually see
The rich man is too wealthy to enter kingdom	but Jesus says that the child, who has nothing, already possesses the kingdom of God
The disciples seek places of influence and power	but Jesus tells them to become servants of all

And finally, the rich make a show of throwing in buddles of cash into the large and impressive temple, but Jesus' life is thrown onto a garbage heap on the outside of the walls of Jerusalem.

With Jesus, less is always more...less junk, less status, less impressiveness, so that all the glory and honour goes to God and to loving and compassionate care for others.

Jesus reminds us that God doesn't need us to be successful – God already loves us as we are. God loves us in our non-success. In a church we don't need to make a good *impression*.

By any accounts Jesus life was a failure – and yet he changed the world. Why? Because he allowed God to be the source and goal of his life. Despite our fragile self images, God loves us infinitely. To give up our life and find our life in Christ is to gain the whole world.