

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B



FIRST READING
1 Kings 17:10–16

PSALM
Psalm 146:7–10

SECOND READING
Hebrews 9:24–28

GOSPEL
Mark 12:38–44

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PRAYER

Psalm 146:7–10

The LORD executes justice
for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those
who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches
over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan
and the widow,
but the way of the wicked
he brings to ruin.
The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

READING THE WORD

First Reading 1 Kings 17:10–16

Elijah set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing

baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Second Reading Hebrews 9:24–28

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the

age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Gospel Mark 12:38–44

As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

HEARING THE WORD

“Wise Widows”

Two of today’s readings present stories of widows in desperate life circumstances. These stories both teach essential lessons in recognizing and reaching for what ensures and sustains abundant and lasting life.

Elijah conducted his prophetic mission in a situation of continuous conflict. He witnessed king Ahab turn his homeland, Israel, into an apostate and pagan state. This king, influenced by the political situation, and by his Phoenician wife, Jezebel, abandoned the God of Israel, and became a worshiper of Baal, the national god of Phoenicia. Phoenicia was a region to the north of Israel. Ahab adopted the cult of his neighbor’s deity as the new religion of the Israelite state. Thus, Israel became an apostate nation. Elijah fiercely opposed the king’s policies and because of this was regarded as an enemy of the state. Persecuted and threatened he was forced to flee his homeland. Elijah also fought against the priests and worshipers of Baal, who infiltrated and began to dominate the Israelite kingdom. Many of these worshipers were Israelites who had abandoned their God and turned to Baal. Baal was a god of storms, believed to be responsible for sending rain, which made him very appealing and popular for the people whose life depended on agriculture.

In today’s reading God sends Elijah to Zarephath, a town in Phoenicia itself, whose inhabitants

would have been faithful followers of Baal. This happened at the time of a severe drought which God brought upon the land. This situation already showed that Baal was no god, and had no power to provide rain, even for his ardent followers. The widow who Elijah encountered at the gate to the town was a worshiper of Baal. This is clear from her words to the prophet, “as the Lord your God lives”. The God of Elijah was “his God”, not hers. Still, the widow obediently responded to the prophet’s requests for water, and then for the last of food she had kept for herself and her son.

Elijah’s demand to a widow for the last scraps of food appears exaggerated and selfish. However, he justified his demand by quoting God’s word, which promised continuing provision of food until the rain came. The widow believed God’s assurance delivered by the prophet, and the flour and oil she used for the food she would prepare lasted until God’s promise of rain was fulfilled.

This story shows how Elijah taught the widow, in desperate circumstances and a worshiper of Baal, that the living and true God of Israel is the one who sends the rain that provides food. Her belief in Baal was misguided. However, accepting the prophet’s word, the widow showed herself wise by recognizing the true God through Elijah’s words. Thus, she demonstrated her trust and faith, which secured sustenance for herself and for her family.

Today’s second reading contains two sharp con-

trasts. The Jerusalem temple is contrasted with the heavenly sanctuary, while Christ’s sacrifice is set in contrast to the sacrifices offered by the Israelite priests. Temples were considered as sacred places where heaven and earth met. Entering such a space meant entering the heavenly world present on earth and coming into the divine presence. The sacrifice mentioned was the yearly Yom Kippur rite. On that special day the high priest entered the most sacred space in the Temple, the “Holy Place”, and sprinkled the blood of the sacrificed animal on the top of the Ark of the Covenant. This was an atonement sacrifice meant for the forgiveness of the sins of the entire nation.

The author of Hebrews contrasts these practices with the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus’ death on the cross meant that he entered the heavenly world, God’s own dwelling place, and, therefore, the true temple. The earthly temple in Jerusalem was just a mere “copy” or shadow of God’s dwelling place in heaven. Jesus’ death was also the sacrifice which brought forgiveness of sins and reconciliation. However, unlike the Yom Kippur sacrifice, repeated yearly by the Jewish high priests, Jesus offered his sacrifice once for all, permanently reconciling humanity to God. The author concludes this passage with a vision of the future, when Christ will return to earth as the glorified Lord, and will bring salvation to those who await him. This passage teaches Christians that the Jerusalem Temple, and continuing offering of sin sacrifices, were no lon-

ger necessary. Christ is their high priest in the heavenly temple, and he offered the necessary sacrifice that reconciled them to God. Trust and faith in Christ are sufficient for the forgiveness of sins and final salvation.

The Gospel passage contrasts three different characters: the scribes, rich widows, and a poor widow. The scribes were a group of learned professionals who were able to read and write. They were schooled in matters of civil administration but, above all, experts in the Jewish law. They were held in high respect and dressed accordingly, wearing “long robes”. They were given first seats in the synagogues and at social gatherings. However, they were not supposed to receive formal payment for their religious teaching and services. Thus, when not working for the civil administration they relied on the generosity and gifts of their fellow Jews for their upkeep. Jesus accused them of “devouring widows’ houses”. He was most likely referring to those scribes who attached themselves to wealthy widows, looking for material support and benefits. Wealthy widows would have been their targets because these women were no longer under their husbands’ authority, and could use their property freely. The scribes sometimes manipulated these widows with clever words and appearances of piety, “long prayers”, for material gain. Alternatively, as knowledgeable lawyers, they would seek legal technicalities to grab these widows’ properties. In any case, Jesus condemns exploitation of wealthy widows in the name of religion, or through manipulation of religious laws. The scribes

used their authority to sustain themselves, but did so in a dishonest and manipulative way.

The poor widow faced a very different problem. Every Jewish person was required to pay the yearly half-shekel temple tax for the upkeep of the Temple and priests. But the widow offered only “two small copper coins”, which amounted to about 1/60 of the required tax. She was too poor to pay the full temple tax. Still she offered all that she had available. In Jesus’ view, this poor widow fulfilled her religious duties through her unreserved and sincere devotion. She held onto nothing for herself, but gave all to God. By giving all she had, the woman also demonstrated her trust that God would provide for her. Unlike the rich scribes who resorted to dishonest means to sustain themselves, this widow showed wisdom and understanding in discerning what is required of the true believer.

The two wise widows from today’s readings show that people of faith look first to God to provide for them. The widow of Zarephath, even though not an Israelite, understood and accepted the word of Elijah. She was wise enough to see God working through a man she did not even know. The poor widow from Mark’s Gospel knows that God requires wholehearted and unrestrained devotion, not a specific amount of money. This widow, despite her inability to fulfill the monetary demands of the Temple tax, fulfilled her religious duty in an even greater measure, by her utter devotion and trust. The author of Hebrews teaches Christians that God provides the means for salvation by his Son’s sacrifice

on the cross. Christians do not require the Temple and elaborate yearly sacrificial offerings. For Christians wisdom lies in focusing on Jesus, and leaving the old practices behind. When believers rely on Jesus rather than any other assurance for salvation, they, like the two widows, show wisdom, and can confidently pray the psalmist’s words, “the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.”

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

The two wonderful and educational stories about widows we have read today teach us much about looking wisely at life, and not allowing false beliefs, or lack of material means, to prevent us from serving God and living according to his ways.

The widow of Zarephath lived her life following false gods and unproven beliefs. She might have been comfortable with these beliefs and customs of her people, but there must have been something that made her open to new ideas and possibilities. Welcoming Elijah under her roof she showed the kind of openness that is required of every believing person in order to understand and see how God comes to us in our daily life. This widow was able to see God acting through Elijah and to welcome something new into her life. She was wise because she did not cling desperately to her past and familiar beliefs. Unlike her, many of us fall into the trap of sticking with the familiar at all cost and no matter what. We cling to and rely on what we have

learned, stubbornly refusing to admit new possibilities. Our childhood memories and habits, what we have learned from our friends and teachers, our uncritical acceptance of cultural values and practices often blind us to new possibilities. Worse, our laziness and distaste for effort keep our minds closed and our eyes shut to God who comes to us in ever new and often unexpected ways. We need the wisdom of the widow of Zarephath not to miss out on God's grace.

There is a very troubling and unjust practice in many contemporary African societies known as "property grabbing". Widows and orphans are often dispossessed by the family of the husband and father who has died. They may be evicted from their houses, have their property seized, and even their everyday belonging confiscated by the family of the deceased one. All this is done in the name of cultural customs and family ties. These customs are evoked and used to justify the greed and callousness of some members of the extended family. This is the situation that perfectly illustrates what Jesus meant by "devouring widows' houses". Justifying such injustices by reference to cultural values and customs is completely wrong, because African traditional society always had means and ways to protect the dispossessed and vulnerable. Property grabbing is also utterly unacceptable from the Christian point of view. It goes against every single principle on which Jesus rested his teaching about the care his followers should have for the underprivileged.

The poor widow from the Gospel also teaches us an important lesson, on not finding excuses for religious inaction. All too often we hear Christians justifying themselves on account of poverty, or lack of talents and abilities, and excusing themselves from meaningful participation in the community. The widow from the Gospel had almost nothing, and yet she stands out as a powerful example of trust and faith in God. Jesus used her as a role model for his disciples. To be a role model we need nothing apart from ourselves and our own integrity, faith and commitment. Like the wise widows of today's readings we need to show our own wisdom by living with eyes wide open to see God's interventions in our life. We should also be committed to the cause of social justice whenever we see those who are underprivileged, particularly widows, abused by cruel "modern scribes", who pervert justice, culture and religion for personal enrichment and gain.

PROVERB

"A wise woman has much to say, and yet remains silent."

ACTION

Self-examination:

When was the last time I reflected on, and gave any attention to, those who are struggling to sustain themselves materially in this world, particularly widows and single mothers in my surroundings?

Have I ever been involved in any actions that oppress and harm widows or orphans? What were they?

Response to God:

I will offer a daily prayer for the poor and underprivileged, particularly widows and orphans.

Response to your World:

I will identify a woman, preferably a widow, and act in some, even small way, to assure her that she is not alone facing her challenges. In our group we will discuss how we can help widows and single mothers in our community in some practical ways.

PRAYER

*Lord God
whose eyes rest constantly
on the widows
and underprivileged
of this world.
We ask for your
continuing care for them.
May you provide them
with what they need,
and particularly with people who,
with open and generous hearts,
will be able to help them
face their challenges
and overcome obstacles.
Make our hearts open
and sensitive
to recognize the needs
of the disadvantaged
and to be courageous
and generous enough
to assist them in their plight.
Amen.*

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