

When Judas complained about the expensive, perfumed oil being poured on Jesus feet instead of being sold and the money given to the poor, Jesus retorted, “The poor you will have with you always, but you will not always have me.” (Jn 12:8)

Prominent among the poor of any age can be widows and orphans. Care for them is frequently mentioned in the Mosaic Law and the prophets, with warnings like, “You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their cry” and my wrath will be stirred up against you. (Exodus 22: 21ff)

We will always have widows with us as long as there are marriages and life expectancy differences remain the same, with women living five years longer on average than men. St. Paul wrote advice to Timothy (I Tim 5) about tending to the needs of real widows, those truly alone, bereft and destitute. If they have any children or grandchildren, he insisted, “let these learn that piety begins at home and that they should fittingly support their parents and grandparents.”

Jesus was obviously sensitive to the dire situation of some widows. When he saw the burial procession for the only son of the widow of Nain, Jesus raised the man and gave him back to her. He was also concerned about his own widowed mother Mary, whom he was leaving behind by his early death. So from the cross he told her, “Woman, there is your son. In turn he said to the disciple he loved, There is your mother. From that hour onward, the disciple took her into his care.” (Jn. 19: 26-27)

In today’s scriptures we have the tales of two widows who gave away all that they had to live on. When Elijah’s water supply dried up, God told the prophet to go to a widow at Zarephath, whom he had appointed to provide for him. Zarephath was outside of Israel’s borders, in the pagan territory of Tyre and Sidon. When he met a woman outside the city gate, he asked for water and a little cake. She protested it was her last meal she was preparing herself and her son, then they would die. She somehow accepted Elijah’s hard-to-believe promises from his God, the God of Israel, that: ‘The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the Lord sends rain upon the earth.’ (1 Kgs 17:14)

I suppose sharing what she had left was an opportunity for doing a final good deed before her death and the judgment of her life that might follow. Whatever her reasoning, her trust and generosity earned for her the fulfillment of Elijah’s promise. The three of them lived for a year until the rains came and she could raise her own food again.

What about the poor widow putting her last two coins in the temple treasury? Jesus praised her for giving all she had to live on, compared to the wealthy who gave only from their surplus. Was she also thinking that her desperate situation meant death was coming soon so why not give what was left to the support of the priestly sacrifices for worship of Israel’s God? By praising her does Jesus want all of us to follow her example?

In its beginnings the church received new members who did follow her example. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that the community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common. Barnabas sold his farm and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles.” (Acts 4:32) If you felt the inspiration to do that, you had to be truthful about what portion of your wealth you were giving to the church, not holding some back secretly like Ananias and Sapphira.

When the rich young man asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him just keep the commandments. He did that he said. Well, Jesus said, there is still one thing you lack; sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor, and you will have your treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. That he could not do. He went away sad. When a scribe approached Jesus and said,

“Teacher, wherever you go I will come after you,” do you remember what Jesus said? “The foxes have their lairs, the birds in the sky their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Mt 8:19)

In our own times people have tried to live simply in small communes where they share everything, for example living in a kibbutz in Israel. The vow of poverty made by those in consecrated life is a faint reflection of striving to be unattached to possessions and even places and positions. Communally however, we are well provided for.

Lessons I can learn from all this reflection is that material possessions and wealth are not my true security. It is in trusting in God’s providential care that can come through the generosity of others. Hurricane Maria destroyed many peoples’ homes and businesses in a few hours just as wild fires in California do. Second, whatever my state of material wealth, I should make use of surprising opportunities to share what I can with the less fortunate.

Finally, I was thinking that Jesus shared his last meal with his disciples, knowing he was going to leave them by his passion and death. What he left behind as a lasting treasure is the bread of life and the cup of salvation. He confirmed that by his resurrection and the outpouring of his Spirit on all who believe in him as their Savior. We are here to unite with him in self-giving to the Father’s will and to receive the pledge of not just another year of this life but an eternal life with God forever. To the Father, Son and Spirit be awesome praise, honor, thanksgiving and joyful obedience, now and forever. A M E N