

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Br. Samuel Springuel

11 November, 2018

1st Reading 1 Kings 17:10–16

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 146:7,8–9,9–10

2nd Reading Hebrews 9:24–28

Gospel Mark 12:38–44

I have been asked by some local retailers to remind you that there are 41 shopping days left until Christmas. Christmas displays are now going up in every shop and the Black Friday preview sales are already starting. Buy, buy, buy! Get your gifts now!

Before you buy any gifts, though, I want you to take a moment and think back through your life, be it long or short. What was the best gift you ever received? Not necessarily the most expensive or the most useful, but the gift that meant the most to you; the one that gave you a true spark of joy when you received it. Have you got it? Now, hold it in your mind and think about the person who gave you that gift. How did you feel about that person when they gave that gift to you? How do you feel about them right now as you recall the gift?

Unless I miss my guess, the feeling you felt then, and are feeling now, is love. It might be hiding under another name like “affection” or “appreciation” or “gratitude,” but at its root level it is love. And that shouldn’t be surprising to us. We love someone who gives us a gift because that gift is a sign of their love for us. Love calls for love. Indeed, one can argue, that without love a “gift” isn’t really a gift. We can receive the exact same thing as a “free gift” from a company, maybe as part of a loyalty program, but we don’t really think of that as a gift, despite what the company calls it. It’s something we feel we’ve earned and we don’t love the company for “giving” it to us.

Now, think about that best gift and the person who gave it to you. What was it about that gift which made you realize, either again or for the first time, that the giver loved you and that you loved them in return? Get past the surface features: the expense, the usefulness, or how much you wanted the gift. You might have received something just as expensive, just as useful, just as desirable, and it wouldn’t have been this gift. What was it that set this particular gift

apart from all the other possibilities? Moreover, how did receiving this gift from this particular person make it more than just some free swag?

Time, effort, the giver giving something of themselves. These are the kinds of answers which spring to my mind. A gift means something to me, it sparks true joy, because it represents the value the giver places on me. They took time and effort to find or make something specifically for me. It's not just something they could have given to anyone, they were thinking about me in particular when they selected the gift. Or, it could be the sacrifice: they spent resources on this gift, on me, as opposed to anything else. Either way, the gift tells me that I am valuable to the giver: as (or even more) valuable than whatever it was that went into the gift itself.

And today's readings, they are about giving gifts. Think about it, in the gospel, the widow *gives* two pennies. It may not sound like much, and financially speaking for the Temple it isn't, but she is giving her life, her whole livelihood, as Jesus puts it. The rich donors? They may be giving more money, but they are not giving themselves. They won't miss what they have given, except, maybe, as one less investment to keep track of. The widow is making a sacrifice and giving the gift of her self. While the temple officials may or may not appreciate this, we're not, after all, told what their reaction is, God certainly does. Jesus praises her to his disciples, while dismissing the contributions of the rich.

In our first reading we see a gift requested and given in a more human context. Elijah asks the widow of Zarephath for a gift: a cake and some water. This gift is small in objective terms, but it is literally everything for the widow; everything she and her son have to live on. It represents, in a sense, everything she is now and ever hopes to be. It is a hard gift to give. Her reply, however, is not one of refusal. She does present her situation to Elijah, before the LORD, but she does not say no. And the LORD's response is one of superabundance: Elijah assures the widow that as little as she has, and as much of a sacrifice as the gift will be, the act of giving will not deplete her. In pouring out herself in the gift, she will receive it back many times over so that everything she is and everything she will be is enriched by the LORD's generosity. For the LORD gives food to the hungry and sustains the widow and orphan.

And of course, there is the greatest gift of them all. As we are told in the second reading, Christ entered into the sanctuary, the true heavenly sanctuary, in order to save us all. He did this through his cross, by his blood. And by his blood he has taken away our sins. He gave himself, all that he was, both human and divine, to us. And he does it again every day; he will do it right here at the altar next to me in just a few minutes. This is **the perfect gift**. That best gift that I had you think of earlier? What really makes it "best" is that it comes the closest to this gift: the one we will receive right here, the gift of Jesus's very self for our salvation.

So go ahead, spend the next 41 days gift hunting, but keep the one perfect gift in mind. If you need a reminder, it will be here, and in all the Churches of the world, every day.