

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 32nd SUNDAY (B)

I Kings: 17:10-16 Psalm 146 Hebrews 9: 24-28 Mark 12: 38-44

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah did not have an honorable line of rulers. In fact, the vast majority were a miserable failure. Even today, tyrannical or corrupt leaders often cause great suffering in the countries over which they rule – especially among the poorest. It wasn't supposed to be that way for Israel and Judah; rulers were to be faithful to God's Word. But most often they weren't, and so God sent prophets to call the rulers to righteousness. Elijah was just such a prophet, God's mouthpiece, to challenge not only the rulers, but also the people who had turned to pagan worship, and fertility rites. As a punishment for their infidelity to God the land suffered a severe famine, as we read in today's selection from I Kings.

Zarephath, a Phoenician city, was in pagan territory, where the people worshiped the god Baal. The widow's situation is desperate for herself and her son. She may have been a pagan, but God has noticed her in her need. Elijah consoles the poor widow but, quite frankly, sounds selfish when he asks her to bake him a cake. Active here is the Middle East's custom of hospitality – practiced even when the poorest had nothing but their last bit of food and drink to offer a traveler. But with the request for the cake, comes the promise that God will provide for her even during a drought!

Can God really do that, provide sustenance for us when there seems to be no relief on the horizon? The Elijah story must have been a comfort to the Jewish exiles living in Babylon. They were being encouraged to trust the prophet's message: God would end their "drought" – provide what they needed during their exile and eventually put an end to it, bringing them back to their native land. The widow and her son would have enough until, "the day when the Lord sends rain upon the earth." The exiles would not perish in a foreign land, for God would deliver them, as God had delivered their ancestors from the Egyptians.

What reassurance will those exiles have; what reassurance do we have in the dry times? What they and we have is the Word of God: a promise spoken through a prophet in the midst of a drought: God will sustain us and God will see us through

to the end. The first reading's story of the widow links us to the tale of the gospel widow. Both stories tell us that God notices the unnoticed, God comes to the rescue of those who have no voice and who are the "little ones" in society – and in religion!

Jesus is in the temple with the crowds, and he is watching people pass by. In the women's court there were trumpet-shaped containers into which people placed their offerings. The widow comes forward and puts in "two small coins, worth a few cents." Which provides Jesus an opportunity to teach his disciples. He calls them together and invites them to observe what has just happened.

This gospel passage has a context: Jesus has been involved in controversies with the Pharisees and religious leaders. He confronts them for building their power and wealth on the backs of the poor; he criticizes them for devouring "the houses of widows." Even though they do that they still recite lengthy prayers and seem models of scrupulous religious practices. The poor widow is making a contribution that will go for the upkeep of the temple. Isn't that cruel! The powerful and religious leaders will derive benefits and support from such poor people as our widow.

In the gospel today Jesus admires the generosity of the widow who, "from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood." It might sound like that, an example and encouragement for even those with little, to give out of their need – if the episode of the widow and her total contribution are taken out of context. But note what the prophet Jesus has just told the crowds: he severely criticized the show of religiosity by the scribes, "in long robes," who are publicly acknowledged, get front row seats of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. Then Jesus adds that they, "devour the houses of widows" while reciting lengthy prayers.

Jesus condemns those who strive after religious status and acclaim yet ignore and even profit from the poor. Those admired religious and pious souls were the very ones who devoured this poor widow's house; her offering would have made her destitute. Do we think that Jesus is commending a form of giving which would render an already-destitute person devoid of everything? According to the law and the prophets widows and orphans had special places in the heart of God. The Jewish faith preached that the powerless ones in society were to be protected. Those who victimized them were reprehensible.

This widow's story in the gospel is often used as a way of beginning our stewardship or building campaigns. The message being, "And what about us? Are we also willing to give until it hurts?" Before I plan a homily today about giving, encouraging generosity when the collection basket is passed, I would want to make sure people heard once again Jesus' concern about the least in society and how, even pious people can miss the importance of the poor in Jesus' eyes. Let those who have examine their generosity, or lack thereof; but let's make sure the poor who enter our "temples" are noticed and served.

Jesus' words today seem less a statement of praise for the widow, than a lament. He has just warned disciples about religious people who devour the houses of widows. As he notices the widow, he seems to be saying, "Look, here is another example of a poor person giving all she has to the profit of the institution." While it is a lament, Jesus' words also contain good news, for he signals to us that God sees the plight of the poor. The poor may be overlooked by even the religious establishment, but God has noticed their situation. God knows the difference between the religious frauds and the truly religious and, in Jesus, God is doing something about it. An innocent has been caught in a bankrupt situation; God can read her heart and honors her. As far as the corrupt religious leadership who profited from her generosity, in Jesus, God is doing something about them too.

Of course, the example of the widow is a reminder and a challenge to generosity. The needs are great in the world around us. Have we ever felt challenged to give, not only from our surplus, but from our own needs? And it isn't only about money: perhaps the most valuable commodity we have is our own time. We have so little of it. Sometimes giving money is the easier thing to do; the more difficult it is to give from our talents and abilities. Like the busy accountant I know who helps some poor families prepare their taxes. Generosity – isn't that what we are asked to give in our friendships, marriage, family and even to those beyond these intimate circle? Jesus noticed the poor widow, his compassion for her stirs up a similar compassion in us for the "poor widows" we observe each day.

Jesus presents the widow as an example of one who has contributed her all. This month we are remembering the dead. We have celebrated the feast of All Saints and the Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed. As we celebrate the deceased we also realize that we too shall die; we will be asked to surrender all of ourselves into the merciful hands of God. We cannot take gold or prestige with us; like the widow, we make a total offering of ourselves in trust. What shall we do to prepare

for such a moment? We will die the way we have lived. As we follow Jesus to Jerusalem we are invited to give our lives the way he did, in service to our brothers and sisters. This will require many little deaths before we face our own ultimate death. Perhaps that's the way to prepare for our death! Step by step along the journey, with the grace of Jesus's self-giving, we too let go of whatever holds us back from serving Christ: giving ourselves to those we are called to serve. Such discipleship is a lifetime of saying "Yes" along the way, so that we will be able to say, in faith, "Yes" at the end of our journey with Jesus to Jerusalem.

Speaking of "cents" – I just preached at a parish where there is a collection box labeled, "Pennies For the Poor." In religion classes the children there are taught about the needy and encouraged to contribute their pennies – a good and early lesson about charity. Meanwhile, the pastor periodically reminds the congregation about the box in the back of the church and assures them that all the proceeds go directly to the poor; nothing is taken out for building maintenance, administration, the diocesan tax, etc. There are other collections to cover those needs! Each month between \$500 and \$900 gets dropped in the box labeled "Pennies For the Poor." "From just pennies!?" I asked the pastor. "No," he answered, "the adults contribute, along with the children, because they know we use the money to pay for desperate needs of people who come in asking for help: the unemployed, single mothers, the sick, etc. That's another example of what parishes do: like Jesus, they observe the poor who enter the temple.

FAITH BOOK

*Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run.
"Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins
people take home.*

From today's Gospel reading:

"Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all
the other contributors to the treasury.

For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth,
but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had,
her whole livelihood.

Reflection:

Jesus not only praises the widow but offers a lament for her situation. In addition, his words also contain good news. The poor may be overlooked by even the

religious establishment, but God has noticed their situation. God can read the widow's heart and honors her. As far as the corrupt religious leadership who profit from her generosity, Jesus is the sign that God notices them as well and will deal with them.

So, we ask ourselves:

- When did God notice me in my poverty and come to my aide?
- Shall I stand on the side of Jesus and see, as he does, the neediest around me?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

November 11, Veterans' Day 2009

Honoring our Veterans while Pursuing Peace

"No, never again war" (Pope Paul VI)

Veterans for Peace

"Veterans For Peace is a national organization founded in 1985. The organization includes men and women veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, other conflicts and peacetime veterans. Our collective experience tells us wars are easy to start and hard to stop and that those hurt are often the innocent. Thus, other means of problem solving are necessary. Veterans For Peace is an official Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) represented at the UN."

"We, having dutifully served our nation, do hereby affirm our greater responsibility to serve the cause of world peace. To this end we will work with others.

- Toward increasing public awareness of the costs of war.
- To restrain our government from intervening, overtly and covertly, in the internal affairs of other nations
- To end the arms race and to reduce and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons
- To seek justice for veterans and victims of war
- To abolish war as an instrument of national policy."

"To achieve these goals, members of Veterans For Peace pledge to use non-violent means and to maintain an organization that is both democratic and open with the understanding that all members are trusted to act in the best interests of the group for the larger purpose of world peace. We urge all people who share this vision to join us."

"We know the consequences of American foreign policy because once, so many of

us carried it out. We find it sad that war seems so delightful, so often, to those that have no knowledge of it. We will proudly, and patriotically, continue to denounce war despite whatever misguided sense of euphoria supports it". <http://www.veteransforpeace.org/>

Interfaith Prayer for Peace

“O God, you are the source of life and peace. Praised be your name forever. We know it is you who turn our minds to thoughts of peace. Hear our prayer in this time of war.

Your power changes hearts. Muslims, Christians, and Jews remember, and profoundly affirm, that they are followers of the one God, children of Abraham, brothers and sisters. Enemies begin to speak to one another; those who were estranged join hands in friendship; nations seek the way of peace together. Strengthen our resolve to give witness to these truths by the way we live. Give to us: *understanding* that puts an end to strife; *mercy* that quenches hatred; and *forgiveness* that overcomes vengeance. Empower all people to live in your law of love. Amen.” From the Catholic Pax Christi USA.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates’ names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “*People of Faith Against the Death Penalty*.” If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

Marcus D. Jones, Sr.	#0217326	(On death row since 11/9/00)
Shane E. Carter	#0486636	(3/19/01)
Fernando Garcia	#070266	(4/19/01)

Cental Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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