



32nd SUNDAY HOMILY 2021

A commentator on today's gospel tells this story to illustrate what he thinks Jesus is on about here. It is set in Chicago, perhaps a while ago. "A man dies leaving a widow and a young son. The son goes to a Catholic school. One day the priest stops the son and says to him, "Unless you have a Mass said for your father he will not see the face of God. It is \$5." So the son goes home and says: "The priest says that unless we have a Mass said for Dad he will not see the face of God." So the widow gives her son \$5 for the Mass. A while later the priest stops the son again (pushing his luck I would say), "Unless you have a Mass said for your father he will not see the face of God." So the son goes home to his mother and explains again, "Unless we have another Mass said the priest says Dad will not see the face of God, I need another \$5." "Dad can look at God's bottom," says the widow. No \$5.

Just like the story, Jesus is clearly making a statement about the hypocrisy in much of the religion of his time, as the story is of how it can be in our time. Like many an observational comedian today he is merely watching how society works and trying to open people's eyes as to what is going on around them. None of his disciples would have seen anything wrong about the scenes he is describing, or if they did they would have merely said, "Well, that is how society is." The scribes, who helped the Temple priests, would have assumed that was their place in society. The widow would probably never have dared to question the system and that the Temple was where God resided on earth, or at least was closest to her here, and so expressed her deep faith through her prayer and her contribution.

So Jesus has the role of the prophet here, using the contrast of the two scenes, of shining a fresh light on what they accepted as normal in every day life to show both what needed to change and what he was offering as an alternative. That it could change.

A number of themes are appearing here. The hypocrisy in the religious system of the time (which as the story shows can appear at any time) and which can appear in any system as we have seen recently in government. But it is this hypocrisy among those who should be leading people in faith that he finds most painful.

Then there is the gap between rich and poor that becomes consolidated in society, as it protects the roles and power of a few, to such an extent that we accept it and Christians have even used Jesus' phrase 'the poor are always with us' to make acceptable, which is not what he meant. This we see in the unbalance of power in the COP26 negotiations between the powerful countries and those who have most to lose, such as Bangladesh, who have far less power than the richer, polluting countries.

Then the failure to see what is wrong because we are so used to it. For example, reflecting again briefly on Climate Change, for decades we assumed that what we were doing with regard to industry and the planet was fine. In the Vatican Documents in the early 60s there was commentary on modern life but nothing more than the need for social justice generally and the right to work, but not on the planet. The Prime Minister of the time, Harold Wilson, was praising the need to ever develop and grow industry and factories and explore for more fossil fuel energies, the 'white heat of technology'. It was not seen as a problem. However even then a few quiet voices were beginning to question the sustainability of this.

Also the underlining of the generosity of so many, especially often those who have so little to give, which we see in the widow's offering and particularly in the widow in the first reading who is ready to share her last food in the face of famine, and to receive someone into her house. That is a scene you could see across large parts of Africa facing famine, camps in Europe and other parts of the suffering world today.

But above all of faith. It is true that Jesus' vision, his ability to see what others cannot, opens up the scene to the apostles. But it is the faith of the widow in the gospel that is the real focal point here. It does not matter what system you might be living under, however corrupt it might be, when you see pure faith, it is that that gives the lie to everything around it. I think I have mentioned before that the way you donated money in the Temple was to throw it into large brass trumpet-shaped collecting bins, a bit like the sound system on a very old record player but much bigger. If you were rich the sound of your donation rang through the whole courtyard. You can imagine the scene, an old lady, probably not strong and not well fed, maybe bent over, totally invisible to most of the crowd, fighting her way in to make her donation, which was perhaps not even easy for her to do as she tries to get it into the trumpets. The two small coins of the widow would not even be heard in the bustle of the courtyard. But it is this that God appreciates above all. The quiet voice.

(As an aside, possibly one of the worst outcomes of the Second Vatican Council, which was never intended, was that many of the old devotions to Mary and of other forms of what would then have been called 'old-fashioned' prayer by some were thrown out in many places. Yet these were often just how many expressed their faith, had been brought up to express their faith by. The quiet voices often.)

As the title to a famous book on prayer said, faith is something 'costing not less than everything,' and however small our voice might seem, it sounds more loudly in God's ears than any ostentatious show of faith. What we can fail to understand sometimes, because of the way our society often is, is that God sees us all as equals, regardless of our situation, and the loudest prayer is often the one the world never hears.