

John Docherty, November 8, 2015

Two small coins

The two passages that were read this morning have, as their almost-central characters, a pair of widows.

The first passage, taken from 1 Kings, tells us the story of the widow of Zarephath. We didn't quite read the full story of this woman - we limited the reading to the affair of the meal and oil - but the story does go on in the verses following the ones we read. Apart from giving Elijah a baked cake made from the last of her meal, we're told that she welcomed Elijah into her home and that he lived there for some time with the woman and her son.

We're also told that the woman's son eventually dies, and that Elijah brings him back to life.

She's the almost-central character in the story in the sense that Elijah is the principal actor in these events – he is the prophet, after all. He's the one who promises her that the meal and oil won't run out until the rain comes. He's the one who raises her son from the dead. The widow is perhaps central to this particular instance, but she's only a footnote in an otherwise major prophetic ministry.

The second reading, from Mark 12, tells the story of the widow who puts two small coins into the offering for the treasury of the temple.

Again, she's the almost-central character in that she is the focus of the story, but she's placed there as a counterpoint to the scribes who have just been lambasted by Jesus : "... beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widow's houses and for a pretense make long prayers ..."

One of the commentators I consulted for this meditation makes what I think is a particularly interesting observation about this anecdote about the widow giving from her poverty to the treasury of the temple. He points out that Jesus is often very critical of how the religious leaders behave and suggests that contributions to the temple could be seen to be supporting a corrupt institution. In the verses immediately following this story of the poor widow, in the following chapter, Jesus takes full aim at the temple.

“And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.’ ”

Jesus could have taken this opportunity either to criticize a religious structure that is sucking dry even the poorest of the community, or he could have criticized the widow for an irresponsible act of giving “... all she had ...” to support an institution that didn’t deserve her support.

But Jesus does neither of these things.

He doesn’t “politicize” her offering by using it as a weapon against the institution. Neither does he diminish the widow for making an offering out of all proportion to her means.

He sets her act of giving to the temple against the acts of the scribes, but he doesn’t set it against the temple, per se, even though he has little good to say about the way the temple is being used.

Instead, he dignifies her meager, humble, offering by putting it into perspective. He doesn’t measure the offering by absolute financial standards – it’s a penny – he measures it instead by absolute moral standards : it’s a modest gesture of faithfulness towards God on the part of a poor woman, not a showy spectacle made for public consumption on the part of a rich person.

Another commentator puts it this way : “... it is well to remember that the Lord measures giving, not by what we give, but by what we keep for ourselves ...”

One way of looking at these passages is to see them as examples of generosity – gentle reminders that even if we have little, we can share what we *do* have. And they certainly are *that*.

But another way to look at them is to see in them a focus on those who have no power in the grand scheme of things, and yet their actions matter. They matter enough to be recorded, and they matter enough to merit our attention thousands of years later.

Now, before I go too far down that particular road, let me just point out that we don't actually know very much about either of these women.

We don't know their names.

We don't know anything about their lives other than what can be condensed into a couple of sentences.

We're only really told that they were both extremely poor, and that they were widows.

In the case of the widow of Zarephath, we're told that she was literally on the point of facing almost certain death by starvation. *She* certainly believed that to be the case.

In the case of the widow observed by Jesus, we're told that when she put in her two coins, she put in "... everything she had, her whole living ..."

Beyond those facts, we know nothing about these women. They are anonymous, otherwise unimportant minor characters in a much larger story. Were it not for the fact that their stories are told in this book, we'd be oblivious to the fact that they lived at all.

Oh, of course, we know that billions of people have lived and died long before we came on the scene.

Billions of men, billions of women.

We even know some of their names :

Great warriors or political figures : Genghis Khan; Attila the Hun; Alexander the Great; Cleopatra; Julius Caesar; Catherine the Great; Joseph Stalin; Adolf Hitler; Winston Churchill

Religious figures : Confucius; Gautama Buddha; Jesus of Nazareth; Mohammed; Martin Luther; Joan of Arc; Menno Simons; Mahatma Ghandi; Mother Theresa

Great literary figures : Shakespeare; Voltaire; Cervantes; the Bronte sisters; Walter Scott (cough ... a scot); Robert Burns (cough ... a scot); Robert Louis Stevenson (cough ... a scot); Arthur Conan Doyle (cough ... a scot)

Great inventors and engineers : James Watt (the steam engine) (cough ... a scot); Alexander Graham Bell (the telephone) (cough ... a scot); John Logie Baird (inventor of the first working television) (cough ... a scot)

Twenty years ago we took a trip to Scotland to visit my family. One of my cousins took us for a drive around Glasgow and places not far from the city. When we drove up to the street where my granny had lived, I told our kids : “Take note, you’re on Holy Ground”.

When we left Glasgow, to tour some of the countryside, we came into a small town by the name of Helensburgh. As you enter the town, there’s a large sign on the road announcing “Helensburgh, home of John Logie Baird, inventor of the television”. When our son Robert saw the sign – he was 14 at the time – he turned to me and said : “Dad, *now* we’re on Holy Ground”.

But I digress ...

We know the names of some of the people who have had a profound impact on the course of history.

We learn about them in school.

We study their lives.

And we learn about them because, I suppose, in some way their achievements or exploits have impacted on our own lives.

We learn about the major figures ... not the minor characters.

I have no idea who Genghis Khan’s right-hand man was. I can’t name a single one of his hordes of warriors. But it was the hordes of warriors who conquered Asia and Eastern Europe; not one man alone.

At Roger Balk’s funeral a week and a half ago, there was an interesting passage read from the Book of Ecclesiasticus (not to be confused with Ecclesiastes ...)

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-15

HYMN IN HONOUR OF OUR ANCESTORS

¹ Let us now sing the praises of famous men,
our ancestors in their generations.
² The Lord apportioned to them great glory,
his majesty from the beginning.
³ There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,
and made a name for themselves by their valour;
those who gave counsel because they were intelligent;
those who spoke in prophetic oracles;
⁴ those who led the people by their counsels
and by their knowledge of the people's lore;
they were wise in their words of instruction;
⁵ those who composed musical tunes,
or put verses in writing;
⁶ rich men endowed with resources,
living peacefully in their homes—
⁷ all these were honoured in their generations,
and were the pride of their times.
⁸ Some of them have left behind a name,
so that others declare their praise.
⁹ But of others there is no memory;
they have perished as though they had never existed;
they have become as though they had never been born,
they and their children after them.
¹⁰ But these also were godly men,
whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;
¹¹ their wealth will remain with their descendants,
and their inheritance with their children's children.
¹² Their descendants stand by the covenants;
their children also, for their sake.
¹³ Their offspring will continue for ever,
and their glory will never be blotted out.
¹⁴ Their bodies are buried in peace,
but their name lives on generation after generation.
¹⁵ The assembly declares their wisdom,
and the congregation proclaims their praise.

The specific verses that stood out for me when the passage was read were verses 8 to 10 :

- ⁸ Some of them have left behind a name,
so that others declare their praise.
- ⁹ But of others there is no memory;
they have perished as though they had never existed;
they have become as though they had never been born,
they and their children after them.
- ¹⁰ But these also were godly men,
whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;

I was struck by this comparison between the famous and the ordinary; the renowned and the unknown.

We live in a society that is enthralled by celebrity. But we also live in a society that is constantly confronted by images of the anonymous crowds who are affected by forces outside their control.

I think we too easily forget that though our lives may be affected in direct and important ways by those who wield power, our lives are also affected in direct and important ways by those who, in the grand scale of things, are as anonymous as we ourselves are.

For all their relative social invisibility, each of these women highlighted in the passages read today brings home the reality of the injustice lived by widows of their day. They are the human face of the impacts of events and of forces wielded by those far more powerful than they.

They're not just two dimensional characters being pushed in this direction or that.

These women are *not* just minor characters in a bigger story – they *are* the story. They embody, each in her own way, life as it was lived by those like them.

We may not know their names, but they *had* names. They had husbands, and children, and neighbours, friends and extended family.

They had lives that were far more fully fleshed out than the cameo appearances we have in these two passages.

And those lives were lived as our lives are lived : one day at a time; one interaction at a time; one breath at a time.

They are the face of widowhood in ancient Israel, but they are not just “poor widows”. They are Martha and Elizabeth; or perhaps Myriam and Hannah; or perhaps Sarah and Abigail.

Just as the body of the Syrian child photographed on a beach a few weeks ago was not just “a migrant”, or just an “illegal immigrant”, or even just “a refugee”.

He was Aylan Kurdi.

He is not an anonymous body on a beach.

He may have been just one of millions of people displaced by conflict, but he was also a child with his own place in this world. He has become one of the faces of the tragedy that is Syria, Afghanistan, Congo, South Sudan.

The challenge for all of us, as Christians, or even simply as human beings, is to be able to see past the crowd to the individual.

As Jesus was able to see past the crowd of people at the temple and pick out one woman and her two small coins.