



# 24th Sunday after Pentecost

## Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



Sunday 7 November 2021

### READINGS

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

## Care for Widows

### PRAYER:

*Loving God - in the reading of the scripture, may your Word be heard;  
in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;  
and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.*

Many of us have heard numerous sermons on today's Gospel lesson, which is often referred to as the story of the "widow's mite". As you recall, Jesus was at the Temple in Jerusalem, sitting across from the collection box for the Temple treasury and watching people put money in. There were rich people coming and putting in large amounts of money. Then Jesus noticed a poor widow coming forward. She put in two small copper coins worth a penny. Jesus said to his disciples, "This poor widow has put in more than everyone else who has put money into the treasury. The others are giving, but still have plenty left over. She in her hopeless poverty has given everything she has, even what she needs to live on."

Most preachers over the years have seen Jesus as praising the widow for her generosity and sacrifice and used that to urge Christians to a greater sacrifice in their financial giving. Jesus also - uses this story to shows us how to champion social justice, which means caring for the less fortunate in society. Jesus was objecting to a system that expected even the poorest of the poor to give their very last to support the Temple.

All Jews were expected to give 10% of their income to support the priests and Levites who served in the Temple, who presided over the offering of sacrifices and led in worship of God. In addition, each Jew was expected to pay an annual tax of one-half shekel that was used for the upkeep of the Temple building. One-half shekel was equivalent to two days' wages for the average labourer. Who decided this? The Jewish legal experts, also known as the scribes.

In today's gospel reading – which takes place in Jerusalem during the week before Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus taught his disciples to beware of those who act pious and holy on the outside but who are evil and corrupt on the inside. He used the example of the scribes. They wore long flowing robes and enjoyed the privileges of their position. They enjoyed the adoration they received from ordinary people in the street, and they had the best seats in the synagogues. They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes. They would charge widows for prayers. Or acting as trustees – scribes would help themselves to what money widows might have. Gradually the Scribes got everything the widow had – leaving them destitute

– living from hand to mouth. The Scribes were more interested in being respected and important than in showing God’s compassion to the poor. In Old Testament times, the Law of Moses stated that the poor, orphans and widows were to be cared for, but in most cases the care that was provided was the bare minimum that was required. For example, farmers who grew grain were to leave the grain in the rows at the edges of their fields for the widows and orphans, but that was it. The farmers did not have to take the grain to the widows, nor did they have to bring the poor to their fields so they could pick the grain.

That was what Ruth and Naomi were doing in the field. They were picking the grain that was left for widows such as Naomi & Ruth. If you remember the story – Naomi and her family lived in Bethlehem – moved to Moab due to a famine in Israel. Naomi and her husband had two sons who married local non-Israelite women, Orpah and Ruth. About 10 years after arriving in Moab - Naomi’s husband and both his sons die leaving Naomi and her two daughters in-law, widows. Widows at that time were the most vulnerable population. If a widow did not have a male family member that agreed to take care of her she was left to fend for herself. This was often a death sentence.

Now Naomi had a big problem. She makes a choice to go back to Bethlehem to try and find some security. She tells her daughters in-law to return to their families. Orpah returns, but Ruth pledges her loyalty and love to Naomi and refuses to leave her. It just so happens that they return to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. As I said - it was customary at that time to allow widows to glean the leftover seeds in the fields. Ruth starts to glean the edges of the field of a man by the name of Boaz. Boaz happens to be a relative of Naomi. Ruth comes to his attention because of her hard work and loyalty to her mother in-law.

Boaz tells the reapers in the fields to leave her alone, to let her pick up as much as she can. Boaz even tells the workers to take out some of the sheaths of barley and leave them for Ruth to take. When Naomi finds out that Ruth has been collecting seed from Boaz she realizes that he is the one that can turn this situation around for them and give them security.

Rather than stay silent – Naomi speaks to an all too human truth: “WE NEED SECURITY if we are going to be well. Naomi and Ruth may not be able to lobby publicly – but perhaps they can subtly persuade Boaz to take responsibility. She decided to play matchmaker by encouraging Ruth to “introduce” herself to her Boaz. Ruth followed Naomi’s advice, and the result was that she and Boaz married and became the parents of Obed, who became the father of Jesse, who became the father of King David...and from that lineage of David came Jesus.

Two stories that start in tragedy and end in hope, stories where the main characters are marginalized from their communities yet give all they have to be a part of the community once more. Ruth could easily have been overlooked by society, and many people in her position and similar positions are still overlooked today. In the story of Ruth - Boaz represents Jesus in that he was Ruth’s Redeemer. By marrying her, he gives her a way back into society and a way to fulfil her potential again.

Perhaps, in that moment of redemption, - of the outsider finding their place, - of the unnoticed widow stepping into the light, - we are reminded that, however outcast we feel, however unworthy, however much we don’t think we can earn our place in God’s Kingdom...there is always a space for the outsider. Jesus, our very own kinsman redeemer, welcomes us back into the fold, into the family, into his kingdom.

And then the challenge to us is, how does that affect how we treat others?

Wherever Jesus goes, and throughout the Jesus story, he is always making space for those who others would have considered outsiders. Can we do the same? These three widows remind us that we all long for security and well being and that we are often driven to great lengths to achieve them. We need look no further than to store shelves – emptied of bread, milk and toilet paper in times of disaster to see evidence of our shared desire protection and provision in times of anxiety and need.

Recognising our desire for well-being and security is also an opportunity to deepen empathy and love for others. When refugees from other countries seek to escape because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there. - or when someone down on their luck asks for spare change – we can choose to see their hopes and fears as something with which we can identify. So today, let us make a little space for grace and give up a place for those whom others would disgrace.

Just as Ruth refused to let the vulnerable Naomi suffer alone, let us stand by the vulnerable in our society today.