

# Failing systems and poor widows

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 25B

Ruth 3: 1-5 and 4: 13-17; Mark 12: 38-44

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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*'Put not your trust in princes'* the psalmist encourages us. Do not trust political systems, or, we might add, religious ones. Put your faith in God...

In one of his notable writings,<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde wrote that, in his view:

*the most tragic fact in the whole of the French Revolution is not that Marie Antoinette was killed for being a queen, but that the starved peasant of the Vendee voluntarily went out to die for the hideous cause of feudalism.*

Hearing our Gospel story this morning, we might be tempted to say something similar: that the most tragic fact in the corruption of the world of Jesus was not the hideous colonial violence of the Romans and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, but that the poor widow gave all she had to a failing leadership and its flailing religious institution'. Furthermore, we might ask, what similar tragedies might we see, and be part of ourselves, in our own world?

Yes, like Oscar Wilde, I am being provocative. However, I think it is vital to understand today's Gospel in its context: not least its political circumstances, in which Judaeen religion was intimately entwined. Not to do so, is not only to misunderstand, and to risk a simplistic moralising of today's Gospel passage. It is also to miss the point of Mark's Gospel as a whole. For Mark's 'Good News' is revolutionary in its character, a call to spiritual arms and radical transformation. It is written in the aftermath of the Judaeen Revolt and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

It is therefore no coincidence that, in the Gospel text, Jesus goes on, after today's story, to speak immediately, and prophetically, about the destruction of the Temple and the '*end times*' violence surrounding it. For, in a sense, we might say today's Gospel reading is a last straw in the end of the old order. Let me therefore trace three key features to which today's Gospel reading points: namely the falling of empires, the ambiguities of fidelity, and the kind of faith in the future to which we are called.

Firstly, as I have said, we cannot understand this story except in the context of the falling of the old Judaeen religious system and the struggles with the Roman Empire. For there is a deep crisis about just authority here. What kind of a system, a kingdom, or reign, should prevail? To whom should it belong? How should it be formed?

Mark's Gospel begins dramatically with John the Baptist, as one of many contemporary firebrands, preaching the authority of a God of renewing justice. He is portrayed as the forerunner of Jesus, whom Mark portrays, throughout the Gospel, in constant conflict with other authorities. And now Jesus is in Jerusalem, the heart of national and religious authority, coming to the denouement of his story. Today's Gospel passage therefore vividly presents the failure of the falling Judaeon world, represented in both leaders and people.

On the one hand, Jesus draws attention to the teachers of the law, represented as obsessed with their own self-importance and using their authority in ways which exploit others in their care - or do little to change their plight. On the other hand, Jesus points to one of the poor and vulnerable, a widow, whose limited resources are handed over to the religious authorities, profoundly reducing her ability to find agency and hope.

Where is there hope in this story? I am reminded of one of W.B. Yeats' great poems 'The Second Coming', written just over a hundred years ago, just after World War 1 and with the Easter Rising and Civil War in Ireland, at a time of deep crisis over political and moral authority and of incipient fascism. Reflecting on such vexed times, the poet wrote these wrenching words:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
the ceremony of innocence is drowned;*

This is akin to the insight of Jesus on the edge of the disaster of the Judaeon world. And Yeats' following words are similar to Jesus' comments on those who should know better, like the teachers of the law and the people, as represented by the poor widow:

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
are full of passionate intensity.*

For it will indeed be the worst, in their passionate intensity, who prevail in the coming destruction of Jerusalem, a continuing symbol of the destructive violence of humanity when it loses its true moral and spiritual compass. We see the consequences around us in our world today. And today's Gospel reading challenges us about our own roles and responses in this.

For, secondly, our Gospel story today provokes us to ask what true fidelity is, not least in the person and actions of the poor widow. Is her giving of all she had to live on a sign of true faith, or not? It is easy to seize on her as a good example, which is how she has typically been interpreted in Christian tradition. After all, Jesus himself here directly contrasts her sacrificial offering with the showy giving of the rich as well as the showy religious concerns of the teachers of the law.

If we have heard the earlier stories in Mark's Gospel about giving or resisting all we have, we can also understandably make this connection. The poor widow's total commitment stands, for example, in stark contrast to the rich man who came to Jesus but turned away sadly when asked to give away all he had to the poor. In reality however, speaking spiritually and morally, the poor widow's actions are much more ambiguous. Does her giving, for instance, really represent holy living or a self-harming collusion with oppressive systems and teachings?

If we are, rightly, to trace connections and contrasts in today's passage and in the Gospel as a whole, then we need to avoid simple moralism and a dualistic distinction between the rich and poor in this story, and between powerful men (like the teachers of the law) and more powerless women (like the widow). If we can legitimately draw out a moral judgement by Jesus here, it is principally a judgement on the rich and powerful, not least the teachers of the law, the supposed guardians of moral and spiritual authority.

However, this does not imply a comparable moral exaltation of the poor, in this case the widow. For a crucial line in Jesus' critique is surely in verse 48, where he says of the leaders that '*they devour widows' houses*'. And how do they do that, we may ask? Well, by encouraging widows to give all they have to the religious institution. In other words, whilst recognising the whole-heartedness of the poor widow's sacrificial offering, Jesus is not exactly commending it as appropriate. Rather, he is also pointing to this as a visible enactment of the very exploitation by the teachers of the law which he has just critiqued. How far, we may ask, is the poor widow propping up a corrupt, and patriarchal, system?

What is the Markan Jesus really commending in this story? Are they attacking institutional religious life and its leaders as a whole, do you think, and urging us to sweep away their formulations in our own lives and world? Are they simply valorising the poor widow and instructing us to be similarly whole-heartedly faithful and utterly sacrificial? Or are they partially encouraging us to religious critique and to valuing the poor and generosity but only in the service of a much larger vision and deeper call?

For, thirdly, if we are to understand today's Gospel passage properly in its context, then we have to see it as much more than simply a critique of institutional religion and an affirmation of women and the poor. We have to view it as a call to a different kind of faith in the future. For let us hope and pray that we ourselves do not live through the kind of devastations highlighted by W.B. Yeats, where '*things fall apart, the centre cannot hold*' and '*mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*.'

Plenty of people do however, as we see from Ukraine to Palestine, in Sudan and elsewhere. Meanwhile, on this continent, First Nations people continue to suffer the consequences of colonialism and the rich give little attention to the pressing concerns of the poor and homeless. The empires of both Church and liberal democracy on which the Western world has rested are both also under considerable strain, as we have seen powerfully in the recent presidential election in the USA.

In the case of the Church, we can certainly expect more of its temples to decline, and it may be that more of our Western liberal shibboleths will also fail or flail in the times to come. Neither blaming the clerics alone, nor simplistic fidelity, are effective solutions. Rather, as the Gospel of Mark proclaims, the real required responses lie beyond and much deeper. They flow from the grace of God, embodied in more sacrificial commitment on the part of the rich and powerful, and more active cooperative self-help on the part of the poor and exploited.

Perhaps the story of two other poor widows, Ruth and Naomi, might offer us a clue to negotiating the in-between and ending times, when systems flail and justice and embodied love are hard to find. For alongside love's idealism we heard about last week at the beginning of the book of Ruth, the two women have to negotiate the realities of a patriarchal and often brutal world.

In today's reading, they therefore combine to help themselves, shrewdly doing what they can. With seduction, and the powers they have, they do not simply fall in line like the other poor widow. Instead, they cooperate with Boaz, not only to survive but, within the limitations of their time, to thrive. In doing so, whilst still living in imperfect circumstances, they nurture a child of hope, Obed, which name means a '*servant of God*', a living symbol of God's enduring promise. Such creative participation in God's enduring grace does not change the whole world, or prevent systems falling, but it does keep hope and divine embodiment alive.

*'The best'*, wrote W.B.Yeats tellingly, *'lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.'* The call of Jesus, as Mark's Gospel expresses it, is neither to resignation, nor to collusion, as we see, respectively, on the part of the religious leaders and the poor widow, in our Gospel story today. If we, like the people of Jesus' day, are therefore to resist the powers of destruction, and to live fruitfully through the falling of empires, good-ish or ill, then we need both to be renewed in both true sacrificial compassion and in strength of acting up despite oppression.

There are indeed many who are full of passionate intensity in our world today, politically and religiously. We can easily be disheartened, or choose the paths of false teachers of the law and the limitations of poor widows.

Yet, in the enduring strength of the cross and the joyful power of the resurrection, there are other options, and, in and through God's grace, all things can be borne and transformed.

In the Name of Jesus, descendant of the poor migrant widow Ruth, the one true teacher of the law and friend of the oppressed. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>