

Comment: *The Enigmatic Gospel*

The Gospel according to Mark, which Catholics listened to on Sundays this past year, is surely the most enigmatic of the four. Why does it begin with the adult Jesus, saying nothing about his ancestry and infancy? Does the evangelist mean to end with the women's fear of saying anything to anyone (Mk 16:8) or was such an ending implausibly sophisticated for those days? What then of the other two endings? The ending traditionally accepted as authentic (16:9–20) includes the scriptural warrant for handling snakes by using Jesus's name and drinking 'deadly things', practices found among Christian groups in the Appalachian Mountains. The most perplexing question, however, is Jesus's attitude to the poor widow's donation of her two small coins to the upkeep of the Temple.

When he concluded his teaching in the Temple, Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched rich people putting in their contributions, then drew the disciples' attention to the widow: 'Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury, for they all contributed out of their abundance but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living' (12:43–44). Was Jesus praising the widow and recommending his followers to imitate her generosity — or was he drawing attention, rather, to the effects of the Temple?

As Jesus leaves the Temple, a disciple cries out: 'Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!' — to which he replies: 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down' (13:1–2). Then, seated again, now 'on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple', Jesus delivers the lengthy response to the inner circle of the disciples, in which he tells them about the signs of the coming end of the world. This leads into the Holy Week events (chapters 14–16): the culmination of the story.

What the widow does, in donating her 'whole living' to the Temple, sums up the story so far and foreshadows what is to come — or so it seems. Her act of total self-impoverishment seems both to incarnate the kind of radical self-abandonment to God that Jesus calls for, and also to anticipate, in a symbolic way, his own sacrifice. Her donation was equal to about one sixty-fourth of a day's wage for a poorly paid labourer, but, since it is all she has, its value in Jesus's eyes

infinitely exceeds what the relatively affluent pilgrims put into the treasury. She gives her little, which is her all.

That's one way of seeing the episode. It focuses on the widow and her sacrifice. But what about the context? What about the Temple? In his teaching in the Temple Jesus concludes by predicting that the Scribes would 'receive the greater condemnation' because, besides claiming their privileges and faking long prayers, they 'devour widows' houses' (12:40). That is to say, the worst sin of the Scribes is that they exploit widows financially. It seems paradoxical and not a little ironic that Jesus should immediately praise the poor widow for impoverishing herself to the point of destitution in order to support the Temple, in her own tiny way. His last action in the Temple was to seat himself opposite the huge urns into which pilgrims threw their donations. Are we to suppose he was sitting there as an observer, — or seated in effect as a judge, a much more characteristically biblical situation? Then, as he leaves the Temple, knowing it's for the last time, he rebuffs the enthusiastic disciple — the 'great buildings' are doomed. Finally, seated again, as if in judgement, looking from the Mount of Olives across to the Temple, Jesus delivers the long speech in which he warns his followers what lies ahead — including 'the desolating sacrilege where it ought not to be' (13:14).

It seems hardly credible that Jesus was inviting his disciples to praise the poor widow for donating everything she had to the maintenance of this doomed institution. By locating himself opposite the treasury he focuses on the Temple, not as a sanctuary for the divine presence, but as a great financial enterprise, inevitably colluding with a certain injustice and some corruption. Rather than commending the poor widow for giving her all to the Temple, wasn't Jesus like an Old Testament prophet raging against religious institutions that were so pervasively unjust that, instead of protecting the most vulnerable, like the widow, they could mystify them into supporting the very system that exploited them? Isn't Jesus explaining why the religious institution that is persuasive enough to deceive the most vulnerable people into supporting it really has to be brought to an end? 'When he gave a loud cry and breathed his last, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom' (15:37–38) — it would be 40 years before it was actually razed to the ground but judgment had already been passed on the Temple and its prerequisites and effects.

Or is this too sophisticated an interpretation?

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