

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(1 Kings 17:10-16 / Mark 12:38-44)
10.11.2024
Generosity

Today our two Scripture readings highlight powerfully an aspect of God's nature and the way in which he relates to us: the two stories we heard speak about the sheer madness of God's generosity.

By human standards, the behaviour of the poor widow from Sidon and that of the widow in the Temple of Jerusalem was irresponsible. Both these women acted in a manner that was not dictated by rules, calculation or appearances but rather by generosity of heart. Here the words of the philosopher Pascal appear to me to be particularly appropriate: "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of." (n. 277)

The two poor women embodied what Jesus' life was all about. When Jesus said: "She has given everything she had to live on", he knew what he was talking about because he gave all he had to live on, he gave his life for us and to us.

It is quite striking to notice that, what the two poor women were able to do, the rich young man (cf. Mt 19:16-22) could not do: he was unable to go beyond what was prescribed by the Law. He chose to remain enclosed in the security of self-righteousness born out of a strict obedience to the letter of the Law.

It may be important to say that sometimes we can act generously in a spontaneous way, but, for us Christians, our generosity should be more than occasional and spontaneous. It should be an ethical decision, a kind of compass for the whole orientation of our lives. Generosity should not depend on our mood or be an emotional response triggered by an encounter with suffering or distress. Generosity is – should be – the way in which we show ourselves to be Christlike, it should shape and inform all our relationships.

Why is it so difficult for us to be generous?

It seems to me that the main hindrance to generosity is fear. Because we want to feel safe and secure, we are afraid to experience the lack; we prefer to hoard anything and everything.

Like the rich man of Jesus' parable, we say: "I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'." (Lk 12:18-19)

Obviously this reasoning is false. It does not work. The more we accumulate for ourselves, the less we enjoy life; the less we give generously the more we shrink.

Fears will always tend to make us self-centred, self-concerned and ultimately self-reliant.

To the contrary, generosity stretches us. It is a perfect gymnastic for the heart. It invites us to journey from self-centredness to other-centredness. Generosity connects us with others in a free manner and creates bridges.

The scribes of our Gospel reading are a warning for all of us. They are wrong on two accounts: first, they are full of their self-importance and blind to those who are in need around them; second, they hide their lack of generosity behind their religious practices and their obedience to the Law. Their hypocrisy is so abhorrent to Jesus that he does not mince his words: "These men will be punished most severely."

The religiously observant people's misuse of religion as a blanket to mask their stinginess and hardness of heart was an ongoing source of conflict between Jesus and the

religious leaders of his time. In the Gospels, we find a long thread of meetings and parables which reveals how it was difficult for the scribes and Pharisees to understand God's generosity towards all men and women. St Paul's words to the Romans were a direct answer to the scribes: "The Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him." (10:12)

Today the widow from Jerusalem is presented to us as a challenge and an indictment for all the times we walk in the footsteps of the scribes. For Jesus, generosity is the seal of our authenticity and of our claim to be considered as his disciples.

It is clear that the genuineness of our faith is measured by the yardstick of our generosity not by "making a show of lengthy prayers."

Today in a world where so many live in poverty, we might ask: are we generous with our money? In a world where there are so many people who are homeless, driven away from their homeland because of climate change, wars and violence, are we generous with our hospitality? In a world where so many around us are lonely and feel invisible, are we generous with our time and our attention? In a world in which we have all been wounded in one way or another, are we generous with our forgiveness? In a world in which there is much noise and words have become somewhat cheap with our empty chatter, are we generous with our ability to listen to others and to speak encouraging words to them?

Clearly, at a personal and national levels, decisions must be made with wisdom and prudence for the sake of justice and peace. Yet, Jesus' life bears witness to the fact that, just as St James tells us, God "gives to all generously and ungrudgingly" (1:5). It is in imitating him that we participate in the building of his kingdom of justice and peace in our families and society.

Enriched by many and various gifts and talents, moved by love, let us seek to do good; let us strive to be generous and ready to share (cf. 1Tm 6:18); let us give, and it will be given to us. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into our lap; for the measure we give will be the measure we get back (cf. Lk 6:38).