

Our Sunday Readings

Beyond their Means

I KINGS 17:10-16
PSALM 146:7-10
HEBREWS 9:24-28
MARK 12:38-44

I KINGS 17:10-16

Reading closely

1. What condition might Elijah be in when he reaches Zarephath?
2. How do you picture the woman?
3. What might the woman be thinking as she gathers sticks?
4. Why do you think the widow does what Elijah asks?
5. What all might the widow be thinking and feeling about Elijah?
6. How might the widow (and her son) have responded to what happened?

Living the word

7. How would you have acted if you had been the widow?
8. When has someone unexpectedly helped you?

*The LORD protects the stranger,
sustains the orphan and the widow...*

THE FIRST READING

Who is Elijah?

Elijah began his ministry during the reign of King Ahab, who ruled northern Israel from 869-850 BC. King Ahab's pagan wife, Jezebel, spread the worship of foreign gods throughout the northern kingdom. Elijah warned that God would send a drought to punish the people for following Jezebel in this false worship.

God over all

During the drought God provided water and food for Elijah. In this story Elijah goes to a town outside of Israel near Sidon, a pagan region that the Israelites believed was controlled by other gods.

The widow's faith in God's prophet keeps her and her son alive. The story also shows that the God of Israel has power in pagan territory. Ironically, Queen Jezebel was from Sidon. Although she'll make herself Elijah's enemy, her gods are clearly no match for the God of Israel.

MARK 12:38-44

Reading closely

1. Where is Jesus?
2. What are the scribes doing?
3. Why do you think the scribes acted as they did?
4. What exactly do you think will happen to the scribes?
5. Why do you think Jesus stopped to watch people put money into the treasury?
6. How might the rich have felt about their contributions?
7. How might the widow have felt about her contribution?
8. What might the disciples have thought of all this?
9. What are examples of such behavior from today's times?

Living the word

10. When have you wished people would notice you? Notice you for what?
11. Do you think the widow should have put in all she had?
12. When have you been bravely generous, and why? When haven't you been, and why?

THE GOSPEL READING

Putting on a show

Jesus first criticizes the scribes for drawing attention to themselves by...

- wearing distinctive clothes
- smiling and nodding whenever people publicly greeted them with deference
- choosing the best seats; at religious functions these seats might have faced outward so that the scribes were visible to everyone else

Stealing from widows

Jesus also seems to criticize the scribes for defrauding widows of the money left to them by their husbands. Because scribes were literate and educated, they often served as managers of household estates. Jesus implies that the scribes cheated the people who hired them, perhaps even driving some into poverty.

The scribes' *lengthy prayers* might be prayers they said for the very people they were simultaneously defrauding. Another explanation is the prayers were said in order to make the scribes seem trustworthy.

The sound of money

Jewish law required people to support the running of the Jerusalem temple. People dropped their coins into vessels in the temple area. Because these vessels were made of metal, a rich person's contribution clanged loudly and for several seconds or more. The widow's contribution, by contrast, might not even have been heard.

The widow's two coins

The widow didn't give in proportion to what she had, as the rich did. She gave beyond her means; she could have kept one of her coins, but instead she donated both of them.

Although Jesus commended the widow's faith, he might also have objected to the failure of others to come to her aid, especially since...

- Jesus may have just condemned the scribes for pushing widows into poverty
- in the next passage, Jesus says the temple will be destroyed, in which case monetary donations are meaningless

PRAYER

adapted from Psalm 146

We praise you, LORD, our God,
for you bring justice to the oppressed,
give food to the hungry,
and give sight to the blind.

You protect immigrants
and sustain orphans and widows.

You raise up those who are burdened.

You love the just
but thwart the plan of the wicked.

May you reign forever, through all generations.
Amen! Alleluia!