

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year B

(Remembrance Day)

The Catholic writer and apologist, Carl E. Olson, had the following to say about the state of widowhood during Biblical times:

Widows are mentioned close to a hundred times in the Bible. They have a special place along with orphans, the fatherless, and the oppressed, within the law and the prophets; they represent those who are afflicted, vulnerable, and deserted.

In the *Book of Exodus*, 22:22-23, God reminds the Israelites that if they afflict the orphan or the widow “and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry.” In the *Book of Deuteronomy* 10:17-18, the people of Israel are reminded that God is “the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” The poor could look to God as their patron.

Although the widow, the poor and disenfranchised were close to God’s heart, widows were very low on the social ladder in the stratified society Jesus lived in. If a widow was not being supported and given shelter, food and other necessities by her family or extended family, she would find herself in very dire straits. The possibility of falling into desperate poverty was very real and she had little control over her predicament. Jesus knew this when he brought the son of a widow back to life, as found in the *Gospel of Luke* 7:7-17. Jesus resuscitated her son not only to relief the widow’s grief, but also to save her from poverty, as her only son could now take care of her.

In the First Reading, drawn from the *First Book of Kings*, the prophet Elijah encounters a widow at Zarephath who was in a very desperate situation. Her poverty was compounded by a famine. When Elijah asks the widow for water and bread, he was calling her to exercise hospitality at a heroic level, for she and her son were almost out of food and were facing death by starvation. She, however, believed Elijah’s promise that God would not allow her or her household to starve, so she provided bread for him. True to his promise, God miraculously provided the widow and her household with meal and oil until the end of the drought. Her heroic generosity was noted by God, and God responded by also being generous to her.

The widow in today's Gospel Reading is the equal of the widow at Zarephath in her generosity and faith. The coins the widow deposited in the Temple treasury was the smallest unit of currency used in Jesus' day, with each coin worth about 1/64th of a labourer's daily wage. The value of the coins was very small, but it was everything the widow possessed.

What enabled this widow to give as generously as she did? It was her poverty of spirit, as demonstrated in her humility and devotion to God. It was this that enabled her to be heroically generous. Her strong faith gave her the conviction that, if she was generous with the things that are God's, so God would be generous with her. It was just that simple.

Placing the story about the widow here, just days before Jesus' passion and death, is not accidental. Her generosity foreshadows Jesus' own generosity, as demonstrated by the out-pouring of his very life for our sake on the cross. Dr. Mary Healy, a biblical scholar, noted the following in her commentary on the Gospel of Mark: "her gift meant that she would have to rely on God even to provide her next meal. Such reckless generosity parallels the self-emptying generosity of God himself, who did not hold back even his beloved Son" (Mark 12:6).

Contrast her generosity with that of the Scribes. I described the Scribes' in last Sunday's homily as experts in the Law of Moses, as found in the first five books of the Bible. They copied documents, an invaluable work at a time when printing presses did not yet exist. In the stratified society in Israel 2,000 years ago, The Scribes would be high up on the social ladder.

But the Scribes were also known for their fine clothes and their desire to receive expressions of respect from others, and to be the recipients of honours. There was more style than substance to them. Everything a Scribe did was calculated to impress others rather than God. The devouring of widow's houses may be in reference to financially fleecing them of the little they had. For this, Jesus reminds us, "they will receive the greater condemnation".

The two widows in today's First and Gospel Reading, however, are a study in substance over style. Their devotion to God was total, absolute and expressed at a heroic level. Their devotion to God also moved them to give away all they had, because they were confident that God would respond to them in kind. They

perfectly imitate Jesus who completely gave of himself on the cross. As the first fruits, Jesus received the resurrection that he also made possible for us. These two widows will receive the gift of the resurrection also, as an acknowledgement of their generosity, devotion and love.

I would like to change the focus of my homily, given today's observance of Remembrance Day.

Today's observance of Remembrance Day is very significant, as it marks the 100th anniversary of the cessation of hostilities, bringing the First World War to an end.

About 70 million military personnel were mobilized between 1914 and 1918. Of that number, about 9 million combatants and seven million civilians died during that conflict. One could add to that total the 50 to 100 million people who died during the worldwide 1919 influenza epidemic, directly caused by the war, and those who were the victims of genocides in the years following the First World War. It was the deadliest conflict in human history, eclipsed only by the Second World War that would follow 21 years later. The conflict was known as the Great War and, optimistically, "the War to End All Wars". It was only known as the First World War only after a second great world-wide conflagration began in 1939, the Second World War.

It is important to have this annual Day of Remembrance because, as the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". But remembrance must be more than a historical recollection of the dates and places of battles, which belligerents were involved, or how many were killed, wounded or missing. We need to remember that wars begin because we forget who we really are—human beings made in the image and likeness of God. Creatures who have the divine spark within them.

Being made in God's image, we therefore have innate value and dignity, given the divine image that we possess. From that dignity flows certain innate human rights, such as the right to life, followed by the right to food, shelter, a living wage, to associate freely, to exercise one's religion without fear of persecution

and to live in peace and security. This is, in justice, what is due every human being because of their dignity.

Pope St. Paul VI recognized this when he addressed the United Nations in New York City in 1965. He told the delegates that if they desired peace, they must act justly. While I'm paraphrasing his words, he hit the nail on the head, for war is ultimately a result of our failure to act justly.

We should not fall into the error of thinking that the pursuit of world peace is way beyond us as individuals. While we may have little to no influence in international politics, that's not where the pursuit of peace really begins. It first begins locally—among our family members and neighbours. We first acknowledge the presence of God in our individual family members and friends, and the value and dignity they possess. Secondly, work so that the rights that derive from their value and dignity are truly present in their lives, and not just a hope or an unfulfilled good intention. Thirdly, support and maintain their rights by means of just acts and just legislation. If we refuse to engage in acting justly, to refuse to acknowledge a human being's value and dignity, placed there by their creator, we should not be surprised when acts of violence and war spring up in our troubled world.

We need Remembrance Day as an annual reminder that war comes with a heavy cost; in human lives, in shattered hopes, in the loss of treasure, talent and valuable resources. Let's consciously remember so we don't forget our mutual dignity as God's children. Let's consciously remember to work for justice and peace, so that war and its aftereffects are no longer a part of our world's inheritance.