

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hypocrisy is not the same as inattention, and victimhood is not the same as charity. These abstract points become clear within the scribes and the widow of today's gospel. Jesus criticizes the scribes with words that unsettle a priest like me: He complains that they "go around in long robes, and accept greetings in marketplaces, seats of honor in [places of worship], and places of honor at banquets." He also says, "they recite lengthy prayers." It sounds like a page from my life; Jesus says you have to beware of people like that. But he fills out the picture with two more details about these particular scribes: "They devour the houses of widows," and they recite those prayers "as a pretext." Those points are my escape hatch: I want to protect widows and to pray sincerely.

Any of us may recite lengthy prayers, whether we come to Mass or pray the rosary. In honesty, we are not always attentive to all that we say. Many believers justly regret that. They should because we ought to mean what we pray. But our problem is lacking focus amid distractions. We don't come to church intending to get distracted; we come intending to pray. When we fail, it's usually a result of ordinary human weakness. Jesus condemned something else in this gospel: the hypocrisy of passing yourself off as a religious person, performing all the external actions, when you behave as though this has no impact on your life at home. You even take advantage of widows who have lost the one man they loved as well as any source of income. Hypocrisy is not the same as inattention. Being inattentive at prayer is understandable; being a hypocrite at prayer is sinful.

In the second half of this gospel, one widow approaches the temple at the same time as several rich people. All of them make their offering. The rich put in large sums, and the poor widow chucks in two small coins. Maybe Jesus heard them clink. He declares the rich contribute, but from their surplus. They're not sacrificing. Some people say, "I'll start contributing to charity after I get outta debt." Or, "I'll give more time to others after I retire." But if they aren't giving now, they may not give later. In their poverty, they emulate the rich of this gospel who only give from their surplus, whereas Jesus notes the widow gives it all.

Commonly, we hold her up as a model of charity. However, on closer scrutiny, Jesus never calls her that; he simply notes that the quantity of her offering excels the quantity of the rich because of its impact on her. A few verses earlier, he condemned the scribes who devoured the homes of widows. Maybe this widow is one example of those whom the scribes have exploited. Maybe she is a victim of oppression, forced to make contributions. She may not be a model of charity as much as a victim of society. Victimhood is not the same as charity. Many victims pay taxes because they have to. Any taxation system that takes advantage of the poor is not a moral system. This widow may be an unwilling object of pity more than a willing model of charity. She reminds us of our duty to protect the poor.

Hypocrisy is not the same as inattention, and victimhood is not the same as charity. When we come to church, we aim to make our prayer sincere so it shapes our lives at home. When it comes to charity, we aim to give—not from our surplus, but all that we have: our time, our talent, our treasure—all for the sake of the gospel.

Sunday, November 7, 2021