

Thirty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2009

We live in a society where giving gifts to people, such as our friends and relatives, has become part of our social culture. Christmas, Birthdays, Mothers' Day, and Fathers' days, as well as many other occasions, offer us opportunities to show our love, our care, our gratitude and, sometimes our sorrow when we want to put behind us things that had happened between us. Today's readings invite us to meditate on the value of self-giving, especially with regard to our relationship with God who is the author of everything we enjoy in this world.

The first reading describes what happened to the prophet Elijah as he was in the land of Zarephats. At that time, a severe drought was all over the whole country. No crops had grown in the fields, and no house had food to eat. When the prophet entered the city and saw the widow who was gathering the sticks, he thought it was his luck to ask for just a small cup of water to drink and, eventually, a piece of bread to eat.

The poor widow did not hide that the situation was critical for both herself and her son. There was nothing to do than to use the little flour of wheat left over for the last time, have a piece of cake, eat and die. When encouraged by the words of the prophet and his trustfulness in God, she offered him something to eat, she was surprised to realize that neither his jar of flour nor his jug of oil did go empty.

What this text teaches is that when we give to God with the whole of our heart, as small as it might be and, in spite of our hardships and difficulties, he is able to bless us beyond expectation. What counts most is not the quantity or the quality of our gifts, but the heart that gives. It is clear, in this text, that the poor widow gives a little, but it is precious in God's eyes. It is precious, because what she gives to Elijah stands for a generous giving of self. That is why it is important that we learn to make our giving to God a genuine self-giving.

All this helps us understand the stakes in today's Gospel as Jesus praises the widow who has given only two small coins in the treasury of the temple. For Jesus, she has given more than all the contributors to the treasury.

Jesus does not say that the offerings or the gifts of the other contributors were not significant. The problem is all about the heart that gives. That is why the Gospel makes a contrast between the scribes who are full of themselves and take advantage of their situation, and the poor widow who is humble and counts only on God.

This contrast between the scribes and the widow leads to some warnings that today's Gospel invites each one of us to take seriously. The first warning is about the desire for prominence. We will never say it enough. To work for the Church is to render service to the house of the Lord and to the people of God. To minister to the Church is to serve at the example of Jesus. It is not a privilege, even if it confers responsibility. When we forget this truth we end up by lord-ing over others like the scribes and the Pharisees.

A second warning is about the desire for deference. It is true that each one of us would like to be treated with respect. However, if in the exercise of our ministry inside the Church, we push

too much on this button, we will be more concerned about how people have to treat us and, eventually, will lose the essence of our work as it is, first of all, a service at the example of Christ. We will be more concerned about our authority and the respect it requires. It will be difficult to treat others as brothers and sisters.

The last warning is about the traffic of religion. This is a permanent temptation for all the times. It was true in the past as it is still today. There is always a danger of using religion for personal gains and self-advancement. We should be aware of it.

Because of the contrast between the other contributors and the widow, it is legitimate to ask a question: Why did Jesus praise her offering in the treasury? For Jesus, the tiny contribution of the widow was greater than all the others. While the others had given what they could spare easily enough and still have plenty left, she has given everything she had.

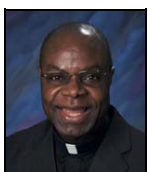
This leads, then, to the true meaning of our giving and gifts before God. True giving must be sacrificial. What does it mean? It means that what matters is not the amount of the gift or the size of the gift, but the sacrifice we accept by doing it. It is like what we do with our children. We give everything we can generously and with joy until it hurts.

True giving has certain naivety in it. The woman would have given one coin and kept another, probably for tomorrow. And yet, she gives everything. The symbolic truth here is that we have to surrender completely to God. We very often do not give some part of our lives, of our activities and of ourselves to God. When we do so, we certainly miss God's blessing we would have received by giving everything to him.

True giving is our very self. It is strange that Jesus praises a woman who has given a gift of so little value in monetary terms. The point is to tell us that we may feel that we do not have much in terms of material or personal gifts to give to Jesus. Remember, however, that when we put at his disposal what we have and what we are, he can make it a great gift for the glory of his Father.

Jesus himself gives us a strong example of self-giving to the point of dying on the cross for our salvation. That is why the letter to the Hebrews salutes him as our High Priest who has entered the sanctuary of God with his own blood for our salvation. He takes away our sins and will come again to bring salvation to us who eagerly await him. We ask him to help us to be generous with our love, our forgiveness, our time, our patience and our resources. We ask him to help us give everything we can for the glory of his name. May God bless you all!

1 Kings 17, 10-16; Hebrews 9, 24-28; Mark 12, 38-44



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Contact: www.mbala.org

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