

TAKE A CLOSE LOOK

Mark is a marvel when it comes to storytelling. His skill is nowhere more evident than in his account of the widow with the two coins at the temple treasury. It is a gem of a short story. He makes it so easy for us to visualize the woman as she waits patiently in line to drop her offering into the chest with the trumpet-shaped tube. Without going into a detailed character study, he makes us feel that she is worthy of our profound admiration and respect.

He shows us- without saying as much- a woman who is to be admired for holding fast to her faith, when death snatched her husband away. People like her bolster our own faith. Take Rhonda for example. Rhonda, her husband Rod, not their real names, and their four young children were camping when a totally unexpected tragedy struck. Rod, a strong, vigorous man of forty, was seized by a massive stroke. In seconds, he was rendered as helpless as a newborn babe.

Rod lingered on the brink of death for months, unable to move or speak. It was impossible to tell whether or not he recognized Rhonda, who stood faithful vigil at his bedside. Rod died in the closing days of Advent, just when the world was about to celebrate the Holy Birth. Rhonda now carried the full burden of raising their children, as well as the heavier burden of grief.

But Rhonda continued to pray faithfully and worship regularly. She appeared every Sunday morning to raise her voice in song as a member of the choir. Tears came to her pastor's eyes one Sunday when she rendered a solo in the anthem, and sang, with shining face, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" And she did not withhold from the "Temple Treasury" her weekly offering. "It's hard sometimes to pray, to praise, and to give," she once confessed. "I can do it only because of my faith."

It is perfectly plain that the widow with the two coins stood at the temple treasury because she, like Rhonda, had not abandoned her faith. The promises of God, we may correctly assume, helped see her through the valley of the shadow of death. They told her that she was under the special care of God, who would provide her with food and clothing, preserve her as long as she put her trust in him and was the "father of the fatherless and protector of widows. The widow, this woman of faith, is also to be admired for her attitude of gratitude. She was profoundly thankful to the Holy One of Israel, who had sustained her in the isolation of her dark night of the soul.

Was she isolated? Was she lonely? Almost certainly. There was a stigma attached to being a widow in those days. Few Hebrew laws gave sympathetic consideration to her plight. One reason for this strange neglect

may be the Hebrew belief that death before old age was a calamity, a judgment for sin which was extended to the wife that was left. It was therefore a disgrace to be a widow. The word widow itself implies disgrace. Widow in Hebrew resembles the word meaning be mute, suggesting the muteness induced by disgraceful widowhood. Although the highest of Hebraic religious thought did indeed recognize the plight and special needs of the widow, it is probable that the widow of Mark's story was avoided because of the common misconception that she was somehow under a curse. Therefore it is safe to say that she was lonely.

Husbands, wives, children who are left behind when death takes a mate or a parent, today must sometimes wonder if they are under some kind of curse. Few friends drop in to offer encouragement or comfort. It is not that people are unsympathetic. They simply cannot find the right words to say. They dare not bring up the subject of death, not realizing that the bereaved find it therapeutic to talk about the departed.

At any rate, we may well imagine that Mark's widow would have felt utterly forsaken and forlorn if she had not experienced the abiding, personal presence of God. As did a young man who lost his mother when he was still in his teens. A mere handful of neighbors and friends dropped in to help him face the reality and finality of his mother's death. His father remarried and moved to a distant city. Then his brother took a wife, and he too moved away. The house, once a home that had raised and sheltered a family, was somberly silent, a lonely young man its sole occupant.

But strangely, he was not lonely for long. He became aware of a warm and comforting presence in his rising up and lying down. When at night he closed his eyes to sleep, the presence was there. When a sound disturbed his rest and he clutched his covers in the darkness, the presence quieted his fears. When he awoke in the morning, the presence was there to greet him.

This presence led him to a powerful conversion to Christ. Ordinarily a shy and quiet man, his testimonies to God's faithfulness, mercy, and love are convincing. Today he expresses his gratitude through his work as a lab technician in a large hospital. He draws blood with the tenderness of Christ, thinking of his work as a Christian ministry, making every contact with a patient an act of devotion. He has recently started writing contemporary Christian music as another way of saying THANKS BE TO GOD!!!

The widow stood at the temple treasury because she was grateful to a God who stood by when others turned away. She not only had his promises, she had his Presence. Her gift was a gift of gratitude. Her gratitude was the spring from which her generosity flowed. This widow is to be admired for the measure of her generosity. She held nothing back. She gave everything she had. What makes that even more astounding is that she was living on a shoestring, a bare-bones budget, and had practically nothing to give in the first place. We are told that in the Hebrew code the widow had no rights of inheritance. This woman was down to practically

nothing, and she gave her practically nothing to God, which left her with nothing at all! It's all very mind-boggling.

The widow of today can empathize with the poor widow in Mark's Gospel. "The rich widow everyone hears about- the one with three gold bracelets on each wrist, and equal number of eighteen-carat chains around her neck, a condo in Palm Beach and another home here- is a rare bird.

There was once a poor widower who, like his female counterpart in Mark, was rich toward god. His white head was bowed and his feeble frame bent from long years of toil over his workbench. His modest house was as time-worn as he. The roof was going bald and the asbestos siding was frayed around the edges. Inside, the worn upholstered furniture sagged wearily and the threadbare rugs yielded glimpses of the ancient floor. The old man's retirement income sufficed only for the necessities of life. Yet, he skimmed the top from his limited income and reserved it for his church. His health declined rapidly after his wife of many years passed away, and he was forced to take up residence in a nursing home. Somehow, even there, he managed to sacrificially set aside a modest weekly offering for his church. He would hand it to his minister when he called, not reluctantly or under compulsion, but like the widow, gladly. He as she were the kind of givers who warm the heart of God, for god loves a cheerful giver.

The old man expressed his philosophy of wealth in a poem that he wrote when he was nearly eighty. It goes in part like this:

Lets use our money in such a way
That it really enriches our lives;
And e're we spend it, for a moment pray
That it helps life's best to survive;
Don't ever waste its uplifting power,
Invest in home- church- and kin,
Then your Christian life will ever flower
And a richer life you will win.

The old man may not have been a match for the widow when it came to giving, but he was a close second.

Let's pause to give credit to others who lined up with the widow to deposit coins in the temple treasury. The rich among them gave generously, too. Theirs, like the widow's, was voluntary giving. But there was something about the woman that lifted her beyond all comparison with the rest. Jesus was so impressed by the distinction that he called it to the attention of his disciples, who were standing nearby. That distinction has already been alluded to, but let Jesus point out the difference in his own words: "Truly, I say to you, this poor

widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.” Hers was the ultimate in sacrificial giving.

Matthew 5:48 says, “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That is a challenge, a moral, ethical, and spiritual goal toward which to strive and strain, as if we believed perfection possible in this life even though we know that perfection is impossible. James 1:18 tells us, “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” Are we not expected to strive, with constancy and faithfulness, for perfection in giving to Christ and his church?

What is perfect giving? Take a close look at Mark’s widow!

What is perfect faith? Take a close look at Mark’s widow!

What is perfect gratitude? Take a close look at Mark’s widow!

And when the next opportunity arises to give of yourself or substance to Christ and his Church, take some action for God and your brothers and sisters that requires extraordinary faith and trust, or show your gratitude for divine faithfulness, mercy, and love- take still another close look at Mark’s widow!

Follow her example. Christ, who commended the widow and is taking a close look at you, will stamp your life with his seal of approval and fill it with joy, saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”