



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"The Might of the Mite"**

Comment: Insert Comment here

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Readings for this Sunday: (7:30 a.m. service)

First Reading 1 Kings 17:8-16

Second Reading Hebrews 9:24-28

Gospel Mark 12:38-44

The story of the Widow in the Temple, traditionally known as "The Widow's Mite", is so often used as an example of generous giving that the background of the story is lost. There is a sinister side to this narrative, since it occurs in the context of Our Lord's attack on unscrupulous clergy who "swallow the property of widows". The fact that the woman puts in her last centavo into the Temple collection was meant to show not only her generosity, but also the corruption of the clergy who not only expected her to do so, but even encouraged it. Similar stories come out of the United States and now even the Philippines, where tele-evangelists press their listeners to give, give and give some more. A member of my own family got involved in one of these scams until she realized that her salvation didn't depend on making an evangelist rich. Your parish leadership here at Holy Trinity needs to be very careful in the way we approach the congregation about finances so that we don't misrepresent what Christian stewardship implies. I would hope and pray that neither the treasurer nor the rector would ever give the impression that anyone should go into debt just to keep Holy Trinity afloat. On the other hand, in most cases, parishioners who pledge are themselves in no danger of sinking!

There is, however, a spiritual principle in the story of the widow. She gives all she has. Avoiding the issue of the financial abuse of the elderly for a moment, we can

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see that this is a parable of total self-dedication. It is an example that mirrors an earlier biblical story that we heard as the first lesson today: the widow who gives her last loaf of bread to the man of God and is then provided for by a miracle of flour and oil. We can hope that the woman in the Gospel story was equally rewarded by God for her generosity, but we're not told- and that is part of the point of the story.

What we give to God can take many forms- time on a Sunday morning, money in the pledge envelope, action when we purposefully help others because we are Christians. In each case, we use the word "stewardship" to describe what is in essence a managed allotment given from what we have- a proportion of the whole given, like a tax, to God. The rest we use as we choose: our families, our security, the government, food, and so forth. The idea of giving everything is not only avoided, it is frightening to us.

In ancient Israel there used to be several kinds of sacrifice offered in the Temple. Grain, oil, wine and incense were offered as gifts, and of course there were also livestock- lots and lots of livestock. A significant fact that is often not realized when we read about the sacrifices is that in most cases only a part of the gift actually went to God- even the sacrifice of animals resulted in a nice meat soup that was shared amongst the priests and the ones who had offered the gift. It was the forerunner of Holy Communion- a sharing of the Holy Gifts. One sacrifice, however- the one offered for major sins- offered the entire animal in the flames to God. This was the holocaust- a word that we now use to describe the destruction of European Jews by the Nazi's. The modern choice of the word was significant, because it meant the total sacrifice of the Jewish race. In today's second reading from Hebrews, we are told that Jesus has offered the ultimate holocaust for all humanity and has participated in the final Day of Atonement on Good Friday when he was offered for the sins of the whole world: a perfect sacrifice, a total sacrifice.

But there are no holocausts in our lives. What we give to God is nicely measured and calculated. Our lives are compartmentalized to the degree that God seldom really inhabits more than a small part of it, usually the "Sunday parts". When Christ died for us on the Cross he didn't hold anything back- it wasn't just part of his life- the

"Sunday part"- that died up there. And that is the example that is held up before us. In a way that is personal to each of us, we need to imagine what a total gift of ourselves would mean. Our morals would change, our world-view would change, and our use of money would change. And our religion wouldn't just be a Sunday thing anymore.

I said earlier that the widow in Our Lord's parable doesn't appear to be rewarded for her generosity. We are not told that she went home from the Temple to discover that the kitchen is miraculously stocked with food, for example. No, in today's readings, there are two very different endings: one widow who is provided for, and one about whom we hear nothing more. That's a pretty realistic appraisal of our situation: sometimes there is a happy ending, sometimes not. Total dedication to God does not come with a guarantee, just the sense that you have given selflessly and completely to the God who has given you everything: that you put your trust in Him. This at may not seem to be a very good encouragement for us to give so totally to God. The fact of the matter is, however, not only that this lack of a guarantee is precisely how we experience the rest of life, but also that few if any ever try it to find out what complete trust is really like.

Don't trust possibly unscrupulous clergy to tell you this- look at the examples in Scripture- today's two generous widows who give all that they have without question. Could you do that? Do you trust God enough to trust even a little bit? I'm not sure that I do, but I want to- and that's the start. And I want us to be in a church that trusts that God will provide, too- in everything. Because I believe that if we ever really, really trusted Him, the result would be miraculous, and I for one would really like to see what that would be like for the Church of the Holy Trinity and for all of its people.