

Sunday 7th November 2021 Pentecost 24
Mark 12: 38-44 - Everything she had
Rev David Coster

It is interesting to note what we notice and what we fail to notice. Our vision is selective; it has to be. We can't focus our gaze on everything that appears before our eyes.

The Bible is a big book, or more accurately, a big collection of many books. No one, I don't care what you believe about the Bible, can believe, understand, take in all of the Bible. Of necessity, we must be selective. Some passages we note, others we let slip into the back reaches of our consciousness. I usually preach from the lectionary which exposes us to a huge range of scripture, but not all of it. The lectionary, even on a three-year cycle of Sundays, deals with only about half of what's in the entire Bible.

In recent Covid 19 times we have heard Christians debating whether God wishes us to be vaccinated or not. Some say that God will protect them, others say that God gives us a brain to use and we should use it wisely. When I was much younger the matter of contention was women in leadership, and just before that it was divorce and remarriage. More recently it has been who can exercise leadership in the church – based around whether they are gay or not. But these matters come up only a few times in scripture (and Covid 19 not all)– and some of them don't rate a mention in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Do you know, though, that there are 900 more references in the Bible to money, how love of it affects us, and what it does to us? If I preached about money and our giving of it to the church and the needy as much as the Bible does then you would be surely asking with good cause "can't he preach on some other subject?"

It is interesting to note that it is not only the Bible that speaks so much about money, Jesus also –according to the Gospel account, spoke more on this subject than any other subject. Money is one of those things of which we tend to say that we never have enough of it to be generous, that there are others who can afford to give more than we can, that if only we had a little more, then we could afford to give more.

Ah, the excuses that we come up with in order to justify our priorities in life – which in reality is another way of us indicating that which is of importance. You know it took me quite some time to find that out.

My teacher was an a very wise farmer in Mid Canterbury, a Rotarian and elder of the church, who, at a time when people were saying they could not afford to give to the church because of the hard times in farming, said to me "David we will always say we live in hard times. We never have enough. If we have a good year in farming it is just to make up for the bad years. Listen not to what we say, but note what we do and where we spend our money." And I noted the new tractors, the new headers, the new cars, the new houses, the batches in the sounds, the trips overseas and I silently thanked that elder for the insight he provided me with, for it freed me to be more honest in my ministry with people, addressing the real issues rather than the 'woe is poor me' issues.

It is interesting to notice what Jesus disciples notice. Jesus and his disciples have come to Jerusalem, (it could just as well have been Wellington, for us) the capital city, the seat of national power, the symbol of all that Israel means. And to put it mildly, they are impressed –very impressed. That which impresses them most is the great Temple – and well they should be for it was one of the wonders of the ancient world.

Inside the Temple are many impressive and wealthy people. The twelve country bumpkins from Galilee can't stop oohing and aahing. They turn to Jesus, "Wow Master, look at those Scribes, people who have spent their whole lives studying the Bible. Look at their long robes and how people honour them."

Jesus isn't too impressed. He knows that the Scribes seek to draw attention and honour to themselves by their dress and the places where they sit in worship. He also knows that their ethics reek to high heaven – taking widows houses for their own gain is about as low as you can go, in Jesus' opinion. Wealth and prestige they may have, but in Jesus' opinion the ends just aren't worth the means.

Jesus then takes his disciples and sits them down opposite the Treasury, 'just across from where people are filing by and offering their gifts to the work of the Temple.' They didn't give their offerings as we do, quietly slipping an envelope with an undisclosed amount into a bag as it goes by, or by Direct Credit. There were no Banks back in Jesus' day – people didn't have Direct Credit, EFTPOS and Credit Cards. They were still a number of centuries off. When you gave people saw what you gave. The disciples sat watching as the wealthy dropped in huge amounts – making sure those watching saw the size of their gift. "Many rich people put in large sums," says Mark.

Like us, the disciples notice the major givers – and no one likes to upset those people do we, least of all the Temple officers who have the task of meeting the budget. Of course, though, these people give large amounts they are not necessarily the greatest percentage givers. They give 'off the top' – 'what's left over' – as someone calls it "Goodwill Industries" philosophy of giving. It is a gift from their surplus, rather than as a percentage of their income. It comes from the attitude, "Here is what I don't really need, so I can afford to give that to the church."

And right there, as they watched, Jesus points his disciples' attention towards a stooped older woman – a woman nearly hidden by the flowing robes of the important wealthy people. Two copper coins are all that she has to give and she gives it all. She is the one whom Jesus notices.

"Hey, did you see that?" he yells to his disciples.

"See what?" his disciples respond.

Jesus is impressed by the one woman the disciples missed.

A little earlier, Jesus had been asked by his critics, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus had replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength." See? That is exactly what this woman has done. She has just shown her love for God with all that she has.

How is it for us? I know that Jesus didn't stress percentages in giving. I know that that didn't seem to grab his attention too much. What impressed him was the attitude and faith of the poor widow. But do you know that if everyone in Cashmere Presbyterian gave 3% of their income after tax as a gift to the church in response to God's great love for them, then we would be doing some very significant things around this place. As it is, we say, "What can we afford? How do we balance the books?"

God, who made heaven and earth, and each of us, has given us all, every single thing we love and cherish in life, all that makes life good and worth living – all. When we give back to God "we give thee but thine own," as we sometimes sing.

There's a good reason why we do not notice this woman at the Temple – and that is that she is a threat to us. She doesn't intend to be a threat, but she is. And do you know why? Because in noticing her we are challenged to take note of our own value systems, of our own priorities – of what we see as God's and what we see as 'mine.' What counts with God is not the amount given but the amount of love a self-sacrifice it represents.

I'm sure Jesus disciples wished he hadn't taken them to the Temple that day. I suspect that we modern day disciples wished he hadn't too. Well, you may not feel that way but I can tell you with utmost certainty that I do.

To God be the glory. AMEN