

Pericopes (Mark 12. 35-44)

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How is a gospel composed? How do certain stories end up next to other stories and blocks of teaching come to be ordered in the ways they are? In his brilliant little introduction to Mark's gospel, Rowan Williams offers an understanding of this process that I find profoundly helpful. Williams writes: 'When I first visited Egypt, over thirty years ago, and spent time with some of the monks in the desert communities, I realized for the first time what sort of process the ... composition of Mark's Gospel might have been. You would hear people telling stories about a favourite monk ... "One day, Fr Philemon was going to so-and-so. And a man said to him ... and he said ... and the man replied ... and Fr Philemon said ... and they were amazed. And another time, Fr Philemon was going on a journey and the guard on the train said to Fr Philemon ..." and so it goes on'.¹ Williams notes that part of what happens in the telling of these stories is that 'testimony is gathered from a wide range of people ... and the stories are strung together to make a point or illustrate a theme'. Certain memories or recollections naturally provoke others, and some kind of thread emerges. 'The individual testimony and the community process work together'.

In the passage we've just heard, it sounds a bit as though three recollections about Jesus formed into units of text (called, in Greek, *pericopes*) have been brought together in this kind of way. In the verses just prior to our reading, Jesus has been involved in conversation with a scribe. There follow two teachings that also refer to scribes, in the second of which, widows are mentioned. This introduces the word 'widow' into the thread, and provides the link to the story of the 'widow's mite'. Who knows if these episodes followed in order, in real time ... and it really doesn't

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.21.

matter. As Williams says, what's going on in the telling of such stories, whether they're about Fr Philemon's monastic adventures or Jesus of Nazareth's teaching in Jerusalem, is that they witness to a person who's had a profound impact on those testifying.² He said this kind of thing, he pointed out this, he challenged this, and now we've come to see things the way he did – we see what we took for granted with new eyes, and where once we understood God and goodness in one way, now we see something else. The point of the gospel, the telling of these stories, is to invite readers (to invite us) to share this perspective, to come to know and respond to the one who makes it available.

As you know from last week's reading, the setting for these stories is the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples have come for Passover, and he's spent the day having his authority as a teacher challenged by all the major factions in the city – the chief priests, scribes and elders, the Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees. By this point in the text, they've run out of arguments and, as Mark presents things, Jesus now gets onto the front foot, beginning in his turn to challenge the authority of the scribes and the whole temple system.

First, he engages the question of how Israel should conceive the fulfilment of its destiny. The time of Passover heightened popular hopes for national deliverance from foreign oppression, and the restoration of a monarchy descended from the legendary King David.³ But if Jesus were going to be acclaimed as Messiah, then this whole notion would have to undergo transformation. Jesus employs a classic rabbinic approach to provoke reflection. What do the scribes mean, he says, when they say that the Messiah is the son of David? Because didn't David himself say of the Messiah, in the words of Psalm 110, 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'. David here speaks of the Messiah as his 'Lord'. How then, asks Jesus, can he be his son?

² Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.22.

³ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p.435.

It doesn't sound like a knock-down argument to us. But the logic seems to be that if the Messiah were a king only in the sense that his ancestor David had been a king, David would not consider him his 'Lord'. So implicitly, this Scripture opens the possibility of imagining 'another kind of fulfilment to the [messianic] promise than that which contemporary Judaism expected'. This is why it became a key text for the early church for interpreting Jesus' meaning. In this pericope, Jesus suggests that 'the political-nationalistic concept of the messianic mission supported by the scribes is simplistic'.⁴ And the crowd love that he's having a go at them!

In the next unit of text, Jesus confronts the scribes at the level of their conduct – their parading around in long robes, eliciting deference and preferential treatment on account of their religious status. This is a persistent theme in Jesus' teaching; he seems particularly allergic to displays of piety designed to provoke human admiration, as opposed to the authentic humility and poverty of spirit that characterises true lovers of God. Not only is it in poor taste, hypocritical. Jesus knows that all this pouncing about could have significant economic motives. Scribes were not paid a regular salary, which meant they lived on the gifts of the 'flock'. Many scribes were, in fact, poor; but there could also be a kind of spiritual blackmail at work here, where the pious faithful understood themselves to be earning merit when they gave for this purpose.⁵ Jesus' charge that scribes 'devoured widow's houses' refers to self-serving religious sponging off those of limited means – a temptation of the priestly caste in every tradition and age!

Which leads, finally, to the story of the poor widow who put her two small copper coins in the temple treasury. This story continues a theme of contrasting 'sham righteousness' with the 'wholehearted devotion' of those often considered less worthy. Traditionally, Jesus' comment about this widow's action has been read as a commendation of her radical self-sacrifice by contrast with the comparatively miserly contribution of the rich who put in large sums. God sees her generosity of

⁴ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, p.438.

⁵ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, pp.440-441.

heart: 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on' (Mark 12. 43-44). On this interpretation, it's as if she foreshadows Jesus' own radical self-giving.⁶

But more recent feminist commentary has wondered whether this really is Jesus' reason for calling attention to this widow. In view of his strong condemnation of the scribes who devour widow's houses, how could he approve of what he sees here? Moreover, in the very next section of the gospel, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. 'Isn't it more than a little ironic that this widow gives "all she had to live on" to a doomed temple? Is Jesus calling the disciples to note the woman's generosity or the corruption of a religious system that would demand the resources of those least able to offer them?'⁷ Or maybe, it's both at once.

So, here you have it. Three snippets of gospel; three glimpses into the kind of thing Jesus said, the perspective he brought to the world in which he lived and prayed, and to the system that would ultimately murder him. He puts a question about Israel's meaning and hope. Is God's calling of a people really just about national sovereignty, or is it about something bigger all together? He puts a challenge to professional religious life and the perennial risk of its corruption by greed, the lust for power and the assumption of superiority. And he calls out the licensed exploitation, under cover of a 'system of goodness', of those who can least defend themselves.

At one level, this world of the temple and its caste is foreign to us and seems long dead; at another level, it's as operative as it ever was. For do we not also see the narrowing of national vision to nationalistic self-interest without reference to a larger good or higher purpose? Do we not also witness those with power and influence feathering their own nests, while those struggling at the bottom of the

⁶ Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), pp.141-142.

⁷ Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, p.142.

heap are somehow defrauded of what they're owed or induced to pay more than their share? As, for example, when large companies and religious schools hang onto profits made while receiving Job-keeper payments, even as struggling individuals and small businesses are pursued by debt collectors and Centrelink.

The vision of Jesus cuts through the spin and engages the heart of matter. His is a vision that's clear, true and brave, never seduced by the trappings of power or deflected from its rootedness in the compassion and kindness of God. His is a vision we're invited not just to admire but to make our own – so that we too may do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.