

## **GOD OF THE WIDOWS**

### **Mark 12:3-44**

Robert W. Bertram

Dedicated to Emma Bertram and Emma Koch

[A sermon delivered at the LSTC Chapel, November 13, 1985]

38. And in his teaching he said "Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places 39 and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, 40 who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41. And he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. 43 And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."

I am sure it has not escaped your notice that I, who have just now read to you the warning, "Beware of the scribes," am myself a scribe. That is, I can write and I can read The Writings, and therefore am ordained. Nor have you failed to notice that I who have just read to you this blistering attack on those "who like to go about in long robes and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues" am myself standing before you, big as life, in just such a long robe, occupying the best seats in the church and not at all embarrassed to accept your well-trained, on-cue salutations. And do scribes like me "for a pretense make long prayers?" Stick around. What may not be so obvious, until you discover who all contribute to my clergyman's salary, is that the

contributors include widows who give more than they can afford. Yes, nice scribes like me do "devour widows' houses." How else do you suppose we could pay for this long robe? Will you then say of me that I "will receive the greater condemnation?" You wouldn't dare.

The reason you would not dare is that, as I too have not failed to notice, most of you in this room are yourselves aspiring to be much the same sort of scribes, with long robes and long prayers, prominently seated and greeted and yes, willing to be supported by the religious exploitation of widows whom you may never even know. It is people like you and me whom our Lord warns other people to beware of.

Not only do you and I, religious professionals, not beware; instead, we make a practice of preaching these very warnings of Christ s – for a living! And probably to poor widows, at that! Is it beyond our comprehension what Christ is predicting, that people like you and me are in danger of the ultimate condemnation? Would we be quicker to heed his caution if instead he had said, scribes like you who live off of widows' pittances are doomed to contract AIDS? Truly, the risks are a good bit worse than that. And we don't escape the condemnation, as some might suppose, merely by wearing our robes not quite so long and by abbreviating our prayers and by bleeding the widows just a little. No, it is not that easy. The fact is, the single worst occupational hazard for religious professionals like us is not ego-tripping, not workaholism, not burn-out, not cynicism, but blasphemy - against God and God's widows.

I almost said "poor widows." But that might have given the misimpression that the widows are basically pitiable. As if it were they who are to be pitied rather than we. Actually, in today's gospel it is a widow who gives what little she has - thereby apparently being devoured by the scribes - who comes off as the heroine of the story, not at all as someone to be pitied but on the contrary someone to stand in awe of and to be held up as a miracle for the gaping disciples. I remember a story I heard as a boy, about a widow and her pastor. The congregation was waging a fund drive. The widow, embarrassed because she had no money to contribute, approached the pastor privately in the sacristy after the service, took off her wedding band, and laid it upon his desk as her offering. "Such a great sacrifice," said he, "I don't have the heart to accept." "But pastor," said she, "it isn't you to whom I am giving it." I ask you, which of those two is the one to be pitied?

Does that then excuse us, the scribes, for making our living off of the widow's sacrifice, namely, that she is compensated for it by the compliment Christ pays her? By no means, our own jeopardy remains, as Christ said, the ultimate condemnation. Or is the widow a fool to let herself be ripped off by the religious establishment? Is she in need of having her consciousness raised? That might be; still, there is nothing in Jesus' observation to suggest that she is not her own person. On the contrary, she seems to be doing a most daring thing with breathtaking freedom. Do you think widows don't know how we seminary professors jet around the world, what it must cost to support each new generation of pastors in the style to which we are accustomed? The widows know full

well that this whole ambiguous ecclesiastical system is the price which they, realists that they are, are prepared to pay if the poor man on the cross is to be shared with the world.

Well, then, isn't it the opiate of the masses, just one more way of drugging the widows, when we postpone the condemnation of the scribal slumlords until some future hell and postpone the praise of widows until some future pie-in-the-sky paradise? Ah, but the condemnation and the commendation are not at all being postponed. That is one of the singular features about Jesus: he begins executing the Parousia long before its time, now already, out loud and for everyone to hear, in the very gospel lesson for the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, even if he has to recruit self-seeking scribes as his announcers, themselves financed by Christ's co-conspirators, the widows.

But then what is to happen to the scribes, to us - us who still make a career off of widows, thus courting the divine displeasure? Is "the greater condemnation" our only prospect? No, not our only one. There is an alternative, also for called and ordained scribes. Our one alternative, really the best thing we have going for us is...The Widow. God is The Widow. In yesterday's chapel service Lois Pallmeyer prayed that the Spirit might help us find appropriate names and images for God. May I suggest that that prayer is being answered by this morning's very gospel lesson? Who, finally, is The Widow who has come to our support, looking for all the world like someone who barely has two coppers to her name, someone who can be bought and sold by informers for thirty pieces of silver, and yet in her poverty "has put in more than all" the rest?

Who else is it, sisters and brothers, who "out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living," including the only Child, body and blood and all? That Widow we could hardly suspect of being naive, a hapless victim of rip-off artists, or anything else but a perfectly liberated and magnanimous God. To that Widow we would not dare to say, "Such a sacrifice we don't have the heart to accept." For that Widow would surely reply, "But pastor, professor, seminarian, it is to you that I give it."

Robert W. Bertram  
Preached at Wednesday Eucharist  
LSTC, 11/13/85