

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney 8th November 2015 by Rev Ross Smith, Lectionary Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44.

When the Small Is Great and the Great Is Small

It is hard to see, sometimes. We develop filters which block out things or people. I remember being in India, at a conference of church people, clergy and lay, all of them “middle class.” They did not “see” the so-called “lower class” the cleaners, washer men (dhobis) and cooks. Eye contact was not made, or words exchanged. It was as if some people were “untouchable.”

It made me wonder, “Whom do we not “see?” Whom do we not notice, speak to, make eye contact with, and why is it so? Whom do we walk past as if they are not there? A fellow congregation member? Someone at work, at our leisure activity, in our neighbourhood, or even in our own home?

A related question that came to me, once, was “Do the people I avoid speaking to, or making eye contact with, do those people wonder why I don't make the effort? Do they see me as lost in my own world, my own concerns, or just plain stuck-up? Do they care whether I make the effort or not?

I have heard of couples who communicate by pasting up notes on the refrigerator. I presume that is because speech leads to argument, and argument, to violence. A tactic for safety.

We may, ourselves, do something like this, by avoiding certain topics for discussion in families, in certain groups of people, and even in church gatherings. We want to avoid negative reactions. We quickly move away from political or religious issues, because we want to keep a safe distance from topics that upset others. We don't want to be, later, involved in trying to mend fences, or apologise for foisting our opinions on others.

Some of these ways of handling situations may be seen as devices to protect myself, or those whom I regard as my peer group, because engaging with another person or group may make me realise that I, and my group, may have to change behaviour and attitudes, rather than requiring others to change theirs.

It is hard, living in a big city, like Sydney. It was hard for the disciples of Jesus, going from the rural towns, villages, synagogues, familiar people of Galilee and lakeside, to the big city of Jerusalem with its big temple, crowded streets and clamour. So much to see, and yet so much to shut out, to filter. Sometimes they just had to shut their eyes, and put their hands over their ears.

It was hard, too, to be in the company of Jesus, who seemed to be keenly sensitive to all that was going on around him, despite him being conscious that he was going to his often-announced death. He noticed things, and people, and drew attention to them. Also, he saw below appearances to what really mattered. He knew that religion and politics were deeply involved in trying to shut him down, so wasn't afraid to talk about religion and politics in the same conversation.

It doesn't surprise us then, to read his evaluation of Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, who loved to parade about in their own self-importance, yet cheated widows out of their homes and deserved the worst punishment of all.

This evaluation is followed, immediately, by the account of Jesus' noticing many rich people were giving a lot of money into the offering box. He also saw a poor widow come up to the offering box to put in her minuscule amount of money. As Jesus pointed out to his disciples, She “gave everything she had. Now she doesn't have a cent to live on. Everyone else gave what they didn't need.” “This poor widow...put in more than all the others.”

Like the disciples, we are invited to compare the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums and two copper coins, between apparent generosity and real sacrifice. The ones who thought of themselves as major characters are, in this story, the minor givers, whilst the one who thought of herself as a minor character, (the poor widow), is the major donor.

It is a stark contrast, and an inversion of the way we normally think. When we contrast the widow's act of generosity with our own acts of generosity we feel it makes our generosity look puny.

Jesus has a way of turning our eyes and attention towards the little people, these unheralded saints who bring us up short, as they reflect back to us a different picture of ourselves from the one we thought we were projecting.

This is a way of giving sight to the blind, this presenting of a contrast between real generosity and the withholding of generosity that is covered up by large gestures and fine words.

We get a sense that the healing Jesus performed was not on people physically blind, lame or possessed by demons, but people like you and me. People who couldn't see what mattered, who overlooked their neighbour, who limped through life, obsessed with their own importance, who were miserly, like Scrooge, until given a picture of a generous Spirit, as happened with Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was a man who was "very rich," "lost," you might say, because he was "very rich." But after his encounter with Jesus, he said "I will give up half of my property to the poor. And "pay back four times as much to everyone I have ever cheated."

Jesus' response to this act of Zacchaeus was to say, "Today, you and your family have been saved, because you are a true son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to look for and to save people who are lost." This meant that Zacchaeus is truly one of God's special people (Luke 19:1-10).

The fact that Zacchaeus is named presumably means that he was known, and would have been pointed out, to the early followers of the Way. The poor widow was not named, but her act of generosity was focussed on, as an example of sacrificial giving, as was his, in the early church.

It encouraged people to think that the poor widow's act of giving "everything" was also a way of speaking of Jesus' self-giving in his life-encounters, and, especially, his self-giving on the cross. There he prayed, in another act of self-giving, "Father, forgive these people! They don't know what they are doing." Luke 23:34).

The poor widow performed an extravagant act. The rich family man, Zacchaeus, also acted extravagantly. Jesus told us that in his kingdom "the last shall be the first," and the "smallest shall be the greatest."

Such are these little people, these small anonymous saints who lead generous lives that reflect the very person of Christ. Her gift at the Temple we now see as a foreshadowing of Jesus' great gift, just a few days later. Jesus will offer everything he had, his whole life, not on an offering plate, but on a cross at Calvary.

You and I are, like all humankind, story-tellers. We are gospel writers and gospel-speakers. We can speak of abundance received, and abundance given, life received, and life given. We can celebrate others' generosity to us, and give generously to others.

In receiving, we often feel ourselves to be the last to receive. But we can, also, decide to be the first in giving, first to be generous, to be wholehearted, to be able to give ourselves totally.

People, named, like Zacchaeus, or unnamed, like the poor widow, are part of our gospel story. They show us the way, how to be extravagant. The more I give, the more I have to give. It is like love, the more I love, the more love I have to give. In the prayer of forgiveness on the cross, the ones who crucified Jesus, are the first ones for whom he prayed. Crucifiers are, usually, the last ones regarded as worthy of such prayer. Once again, Jesus says, by his generous act, the last shall be first.

The small shall be great, the great shall be small. Even if I have much, or even if I have little, I have abundant life when I give everything.