

Mark 12 : 35-44 - Whose son is the Christ? The widow's offering

<sup>35</sup> While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, 'Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David?' <sup>36</sup> David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

*"The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'"*

<sup>37</sup> David himself calls him "Lord". How then can he be his son?'

The large crowd listened to him with delight.

### **Warning against the teachers of the law**

<sup>38</sup> As he taught, Jesus said, 'Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the market-places, <sup>39</sup> and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. <sup>40</sup> They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.'

### **The widow's offering**

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<sup>43</sup> Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. <sup>44</sup> They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.'

Last week was the last time we see Jesus being questioned by the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes (or teachers of the Law of Moses). They all tried to trap Jesus with questions they thought they knew the answer would be ambiguous and displease one section of society and please another. Rendering Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's avoided the question of to whom should taxes be paid, while the marriage at the resurrection question for the wife with seven husbands which was meant to make Jesus look foolish made the Sadducees look foolish, and the first commandment question from a scribe had the grudging respect from its questioner for getting that one right. After these clashes, no one dared ask Jesus anymore questions and instead Jesus is able to teach those willing to listen inside the Temple unimpeded by the Temple guards, the high priests, the scribes and all those who had believed themselves to know the Law better than anyone else.

Jesus asks a question while teaching in the Temple courts. In Matthew 23:41, he is asking the Pharisees gathered there.

It is question of interpretation of Scripture in Psalm 110:1. He asks why do they say that the Christ, the Messiah – which means the anointed one – is the son of David? The Pharisees and the scribes believed that the Messiah – the anointed one – was going to be descended from David and be a king to sweep away the armies of occupation in Israel and restore Israel to its former glory as it was in the days of David and Solomon. At that time the psalms were nearly all believed to be written by David. Psalm 110 refers the coming king, supposedly the Messiah. David says in his 110<sup>th</sup> psalm in verse 1 that *"The LORD – a word used to mean the Messiah – says to my Lord - that is King David – sit at my*

right hand.” If the Messiah is David’s son or descendant, then how can this son or great great (numerous greats) grandson say this to his long dead father or great (numerous greats) grand father? Other references to the Messiah being the son of David are found in

**Isaiah 9:2-7** <sup>2</sup>The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. <sup>3</sup>You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. <sup>4</sup>For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. <sup>5</sup>Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup>For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

**Isaiah 11:1-9** A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. <sup>2</sup>The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD – <sup>3</sup>and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; <sup>4</sup>but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. <sup>5</sup>Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist. <sup>6</sup>The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. <sup>7</sup>The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. <sup>9</sup>They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

**Jeremiah 23:5-6** <sup>5</sup>‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. <sup>6</sup>In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Saviour.

**Jeremiah 33:14-18** <sup>14</sup>“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will fulfil the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. <sup>15</sup>“In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Saviour.” <sup>17</sup>For this is what the LORD says: “David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel, <sup>18</sup>nor will the Levitical priests ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices.”

**Ezekiel 34:23-24** <sup>23</sup>I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup>I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Indeed Jesus was called son of David by those who knew his supposed father Joseph and mother Mary were both descendants of David.

Jesus is not denying that he is the Messiah, Jesus is not denying that he is the son of David. What he is saying is that he is the son of David and also David's Lord. But in this instance the Pharisees refuse to answer the question and he leaves the question hanging for them to ponder on and get frustrated that the Scripture Jesus quotes is a paradox they cannot address with the logic available to them without thinking the unthinkable – that Jesus is Lord and the Messiah.

Jesus is trying to make the people understand that the Messiah is not a conquering king, but a servant of God, a shepherd of Israel, wanting to bring men the love of God.

The next passage in verse 37 says *The large crowd listened to him with delight*. The Pharisees and scribes couldn't answer the question Jesus puts to them, and the crowd – the people who the Pharisees and scribes feared because they knew that whoever made them look inadequate would mean their positions in society would be diminished. The crowd liked seeing these proud self-righteous so-called experts in the Law unable to answer what seems a simple question from the Scriptures they claimed they understood so well. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, the crowds who followed after witnessing the miracles and hearing the teaching of Jesus are feared because the religious leaders had no army – other than the Temple guards – to defend themselves. In every situation in history, the few who consider themselves in charge and privileged always fear the mob if they are defenceless, and ever since the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus and his followers were seen as a real threat, all the more so when the crowd is laughing at the scribes and those who were supposed to know the Law better than anyone else.

<sup>38</sup>As he taught, Jesus said, *'Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the market-places,* <sup>39</sup>*and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. <sup>40</sup>They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.'*

Jesus now puts the boot in. Jonathan mentioned last week that the Pharisees wore outsize tassels or phylacteries to show how religious they were. They also wore outsize robes that dragged across the ground so they could only walk in a stately manner to avoid tripping up. They loved to receive respectful greetings, the best seats in the synagogues, and top table in any banquets. The word Rabbi is commonly seen to mean teacher but it actually means "my master". That implies a position of superiority over inferiors. We can see that telling the crowd what they already knew about the scribes, the teachers of the law, was something that would make the scribes feel uncomfortable.

The next bit about "devouring widows' houses" is for us obscure. Josephus, a Pharisee himself, mentions in his History of the Jews that some Pharisees and scribes took money from gullible women for legal advice which they were supposed to provide for nothing, because they already had a living from a trade or land. Some scribes had such high opinions of themselves that they believed it was an honour for people, especially widows who had no husband to guide them, to give them money to support their learning and that this giving would earn these widows a better place in heaven. In today's world some church leaders have managed to persuade people to be over generous, even to the extent of borrowing, to enable them to claim that the work of the churches they run will be blessed by such generosity. Actually it results in enriching the church leaders with lavish lifestyles at the expense of those who can ill afford the gifts expected of them, because the church leaders say that God will bless them richly and prosper them with such sacrificial giving. History repeats itself. Lastly Jesus mentions lengthy showy prayers – that also happens today with some church leaders trying to impress their congregations rather than trying to impress God. Wolves in sheep's clothing existed in the days of Jesus as they do in the church today. The crowds in the temple knew exactly what Jesus was talking about having seen examples of what he was

telling them, and to end this point, he tells whoever is listening, scribes as well the ordinary people coming to the Passover feast, that these vain men, these exploiters of those without protection, would be severely punished. We see in Matthew's Gospel 20:16 that the first shall be last and the last first.

This passage warns against three things relevant for us today: (1) the desire for prominence and position in the church which is the motivation for some who would rather be masters than servants. (2) the desire for respect and deference from others rather than a willingness to be humble and a servant of others. (3) the desire to use religious traditions, rules and the twisting of Scripture often out of context for self advancement and self enrichment. This is a warning for those who are in the church for what they can get out of it, rather than for what they can put into it.

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The Temple gate that divided the Court of the Gentiles (the outer area which was cloistered, and where the money changers and markets for animals and doves to be sacrificed were) and the Court of Women was called the Gate Beautiful. Previous discussions and arguments would have been in the outer Court of the Gentiles. Inside the Court of Women so called because women could not go further inside the Temple complex, but it was open to all Jews, both men and women, and it was the place where there were thirteen collecting boxes called "the trumpets" because of their shape. Each had a special purpose: some to buy corn, wine or oil for sacrifices, others for the daily sacrifices and running costs of the Temple. As is pointed out by Mark, some threw in large amounts, which would doubtless fall into the trumpet shaped boxes with much clinking and tinkling as they clattered into the bottom of the box. We see the ostentatious giving of the rich. This no different from the large plaques put up in churches mentioning what someone had donated for the relief of the poor of the parish (usually a century or more ago) or to build the church (common in Rome where gold lettered inscriptions are writ large across the front of many churches saying who built them or endowed funds for them). The widow put in her two mites (which make half a farthing) which was all she had. Jesus as he so often does, tells his disciples to look at the hearts of people, to look at their motivation, rather than merely what they do.

Real giving is sacrificial where generosity goes beyond what we can easily afford. When it comes to giving, do we all understand that all that we have comes from God and that he lets us keep some of what we have to live on, rather than to accumulate like the rich man who built more barns to store his wealth. Luke records a parable of Jesus.

**Luke 12** <sup>16</sup> And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. <sup>17</sup> He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' <sup>18</sup> "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. <sup>19</sup> And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" <sup>20</sup> "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' <sup>21</sup> "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

All Jesus' teachings on wealth and money make uncomfortable reading for all of us who have not given all our possessions to the poor and followed Jesus depending on Him and Him alone. There always have to be people with money to give to others. Without givers, there can be no recipients to be blessed with what the givers provide. Jesus says "the poor will always be with you" (Matthew 26: ) but that in itself is taken out of context because he is referring to the extravagant use of expensive perfume poured on his head. Jesus says to his complaining disciples "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor will always be with you, but you will not always have me." She did this to prepare Jesus for burial.

Back to the widow's mite: what does it say to us today? It illustrates the need to surrender our lives to Jesus, to submit to him and to be generous. One of the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in **Romans 12:6-8** is generosity: *<sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; **if it is giving, then give generously**; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.* In Paul's second letter to the **Corinthians 9:6-8** he says *<sup>6</sup> Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. <sup>7</sup> Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup> And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

Jesus praises the widow for giving all she had, but we cannot draw from this we too should give all we have to the church, and then expect others to provide for us after we've done this. People have tried this: they're called monks and nuns who have given all their personal possessions to a church, which in the distant past was established by the generosity of the rich to provide buildings and estates to maintain those buildings and the people there. This was and still is common throughout Christendom... the Catholics, the Orthodox, and also among Protestants like the Mennonites, Amish, and Bruderhof. Most of these communities depended on ownership of land and the generosity of believers. Hermits were more solitary, and lacked the support of church estates and instead depended on what they foraged, fished and caught, plus what others gave them in return for advice and teaching. We've looked at the Puritan prayers written by Christians who sought to live a purer life than that available through the then Church of England's monopoly. Some, like the Pilgrim Fathers left to found new communities in New England; others like the Diggers sought to hold land and possessions in common. The early church in Acts appeared to be a community in Jerusalem that shared possessions, worshipping daily in the Temple and eating together. The wherewithal for all this is scarcely mentioned other than when believers sold possessions and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. The reality is that some must have still had day jobs, trades, professions, while at the same time realising that accumulating wealth was no longer important to them.