

32nd Sunday of Year B (2012)

Forty Martyrs' & St Bede's

Widows in the Bible are examples of powerlessness. A widow having no husband had no one to speak for her, unless she had a grown up son. A widow with no husband and no son was without a voice. The word in Hebrew means 'one who is silent'.

We meet two widows today. One expects to die for there is famine across the land because there is no rain. She is about to prepare a final meal and then get ready for a wretched death. The poor are not always models of charitable giving. They cannot afford to be. But this one shares what she has with the holy man, Elijah, and her reward is to have enough to get by through the days of the drought.

The second widow is another model of charity. She also has little to give but gives it all. Applying relentless logic to the brief description: if she gives "all she had to live on" then she has nothing to live on, therefore she goes home to die.

She is another example of perfect discipleship. As we have seen time and again Mark in his Gospel shows us little people who are paradigms of what it means to be a follower of the Lord. Two weeks ago we met Bartimeus who, seeing again, followed Jesus '*on the road*'. Now we have a widow, a voiceless person, who gives all she has, two pennies, to God and perhaps thereafter dies. Jesus is now in Jerusalem. Shortly he will be anointed in preparation for his death; the Passion will have begun. He will give all he has to the Father, taking the faults of many on himself. And Mark, writing to a persecuted people who were being asked to give all they have for Christ, is encouraging them to follow the path of perfect discipleship.

At the heart of our faith is a man who died in severe pain on an instrument of torture. Part of the message of the cross is that death is a transition, not a final end. The death of the widow is, like her gift to the Temple's treasury, an act of faith; an entrusting of herself to the loving kindness of God.

Death is not without fear and dread. Jesus himself is in anguish in Gethsemane the night before his death. The process of dying in its final days and moments is likely to be a distressing one. But death is not the final act. "Lord, for your faithful people, life is changed not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven." So runs the Preface of the Mass for the Dead.

This belief is, in our country at the present time, under great and sustained attack. The secularist movement promotes an atheistic agenda with an evangelic zeal and sometimes no little vitriol.

There is a contradiction at the centre of the atheistic-secularist stand-point. If this life is all that there is, and then nothing, should not this life be preserved and prolonged at

all costs? Yet, it is not the secularists who protect life to the utmost but us, the supernaturalists. Part of the wider secular agenda is to dispose of the awkward, the unwanted baby in the womb, handicapped babies, Downs' Syndrome babies and now, those victories won, the agenda has firmly moved to deal with those who want assistance to commit suicide. It will inevitably, despite promises of safeguards, it will inevitably move to include those who are in their declining years and are perceived by themselves or others to be a burden. "Let's help them out", is the appeal - and we all know that soon after voluntary euthanasia is allowed there will be no choice but to be forced out, through the overwhelming pressure of being a responsibility too many to others, an expense to society, an inconvenience.

"Quality of life" is the battle-cry. Life itself is the quality. But in our society's affluence, in its search for material happiness we are losing sight of the value of life. When that is lost, what remains?

Life in this world is not an absolute value. There are situations where life can be sacrificed for a greater good: to defend one's loved ones, to try to save someone in mortal danger; to defend one's country. Today is Remembrance Sunday and we pay tribute to those who, "for our tomorrow gave their today" and all their tomorrows. The memory of what they and their colleagues did must never fade. If only we remembered more clearly we might be more cautious about engaging in armed conflict, in far away places, for questionable causes.

If this life is all there is, over so briefly for all of us, and so short and brutal for so many, if this is all there is, then hedonism, enjoyment, eat, drink and be merry is the only sound advice, because all too soon 'tomorrow we die'. Jesus' death and resurrection shows there is more. As does the widow who willingly gave to God all that she had to live on, assured that God is never unmindful of those who give in faith and in trust.