

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2021

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This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation (on Zoom), and significantly modified for the Alpine Uniting Church in Jindabyne, which this week begins its summer practice of casual outdoor worship commencing with breakfast. We remain with the gospel of Mark, and today encounter the story of the "widow's mite".

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God our Father,
We praise you that, for you, all things are indeed possible.
We praise you because you are not part of the created world,
with all its restrictions and impossibilities and inevitabilities.
We praise you as the creator of all things,
the one who stands astride the creation, its master and its regulator;
as the one for whom nothing is impossible, no natural law a limitation,
no impossibility an impediment;
as the one whose only impetus is love, and only impulse is grace.
Jesus our brother and our saviour,
we praise you that you have lived among us, have known the life that we know,
have been tempted as we are tempted, and yet are without sin;
that you willingly placed yourself in the power of our cruelty and our hatred,
that you went, willingly, to the cross of shame and the finality of death;
and yet, Lord, that you rose from the grave, as you said you would,
rose to new life, and to embrace the glory that was yours before time began;
and we praise you that you love us, you beckon us
and you invite us to join you in the new life that is your gift
to those who love you.
Holy Spirit, we praise you that you are the presence of God with us,
hour by hour and day by day,
that we are never left alone to face the world,
as you shape us, and protect us, and teach us, and encourage us.
Trinity of God, we worship and adore you.

We know that if we say we are without sin, the truth is not in us.
We deceive ourselves, but never you.
So we confess before you and each other that we have indeed sinned.
We are guilty of the thoughtless word,
and the word of comfort or healing left unsaid.
We have sometimes been careless or economical with the truth, or deceptive,
telling ourselves that our motives are pure.
We have been needlessly legalistic, when we should have been gracious.
We have condemned or blamed, when we should have forgiven.
We have been judgmental, when we should have been accepting;
and we have judged others
by a standard different from that by which we judge ourselves.
We have been neglectful of our relationship with you,
when it should have been central to our lives.
In short, Father, we have failed to love you with all our heart,
and we have failed to love our neighbours as ourselves. We have sinned.
Forgive us, we pray, and grant us the strength

to be a people more worthy to be called your daughters and sons.
For we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.

2 Declaration of Forgiveness.

Jesus told his disciples,
*With man this is impossible, but not with God;
all things are possible with God.*
Even we can be forgiven,
for God forgives not seven time, not seventy times,
but seventy times seven times.
Christ himself bore our sins, that we might be forgiven;
so in Christ, our sins *are* forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 Bible Readings –

Mark 12:38-44

4 Sermon: See below

5 Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer

(Most Christians wish that Halloween had not landed in Australia. However, the day after Halloween is All Saints' Day. Although the Protestant tradition does not canonise people in the same way the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches do, we certainly do recognise the usage of the New Testament, that "saints" are exemplary believers. And there are plenty such for whom to give thanks. So this prayer recognises that Monday was All Saints' Day.)

Lord our God,
We give thanks for the many labourers you have placed in the field
to do the work of the gospel.
We give thanks for faithful witnesses throughout the ages,
who have brought the good news of Jesus to people across the globe.
We give thanks for those whose names history remembers –
the earliest evangelists, the Church Fathers, the great reformers,
the epic missionaries,
and all the other sisters and brothers whose endeavours are well known.
Their faithfulness and witness are writ large for us all to see.
But we give thanks too for those whose ministry was not so public,
who worked quietly in communities,
who tended to the sick or aided the poor,
who spoke a comforting word, or upheld the suffering in prayer,
who toiled as ministers and priests,
as Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders,
or simply proclaimed their faith within their own family and friends,
witnessing to Jesus Christ and the salvation which is in him.
In our own lives, Father, we give thanks for those who nurtured us in the faith –
for parents and family members, Christian friends, caring adults;
even for those who wrote or said things we came across
and which made an impression.
We take a moment to name before you those whose ministry we cherish,
and to give thanks that they made it possible for us to know the gospel
and to follow Jesus.

Finally, we pray for all those saints
who proclaim the good news throughout the world today.
Some do so in very dangerous places,
where governments or other faiths place them in peril;
some witness in increasingly secular Western societies,
in which the very notion of religion has been denigrated,
or hijacked by those with strange ideas about spiritual matters.
Again, Father, we recognise that millions of saints have quiet ministries,
of which we are unaware,
but their labour for the kingdom is no less important
than that of those with a higher profile.
For all these saints, past and present, we give thanks.
And for those still labouring in the field,
we pray for courage, perseverance and faithfulness,
and that their ministries will be powerful witnesses
to him who is the only hope for our world.

And now Father we conclude with the prayer that Jesus gave us,

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

6 Blessing and Dismissal

Go into the world to be the generous people of God.
Spurn the love of money that surrounds you,
and count your wealth as no more than a means to an end.
Give all you have to Jesus,
for in Jesus is true life and true happiness.
The blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you now,
and abide with you evermore.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

It's very hard not to see the conspicuous displays of wealth that are all around us. The latest fad among the world's superrich is space tourism. Elon Musk's SpaceX, Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin, Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic – the three financial titans are competing with each other to pioneer commercial space flight, investing squillions of dollars into their ventures. Each of them has claimed that their own space flight was a life-changing experience; each of them holds out a visionary aspiration for their investment. Richard Branson, apparently, will democratise space travel by developing it as a tourist experience; Elon Musk insists that he will be the one to ensure that humankind is not a single-planet species; Jeff Bezos claims that he believes almost religiously in building space colonies. Their extraordinary wealth has propelled them to the world stage, where they are applauded as the great visionaries of a new, space-oriented future.

Of course wealth of that order is confined to the very few, but in 2017 *The Guardian* reported that the richest *one percent* of the global population owned *half* of the world's wealth; and in 2019 Oxfam told the World Economic Forum in Davos that the twenty-six richest *individuals* in the world owned as much as the poorest fifty percent of the world's population. So it's not just our squillionaire astronauts who have vast sums of money at their disposal. No wonder we see unthinkable sums expended at the whim of the world's wealthiest.

With wealth comes power, and the reverse is also true. With 2.89 billion active users of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg controls a virtual nation that is bigger than India and China combined. Twitter, with a measly 206 million active users, nevertheless makes Jack Dorsey's empire bigger than most nation states. Even Facebook, though, is dwarfed by Google, with its almost 4 billion users – over ninety percent of all the world's internet users! Which places Larry Page in a position that is utterly unprecedented in history, and would have been the envy of any of the infamous potentates of past times. The people behind these purportedly “free” services have accumulated vast wealth and power. From time to time governments do try to curtail or limit their activities, but we've become used to their feigned contrition, bullying, obfuscation and unkept promises. And they continue to strut the globe almost as demigods.

The world looks up to the superrich; they're held before us as exemplary achievers; their words are accorded special significance; they are sought-after speakers at all kinds of events across the globe; what they say *matters*. And when one of them decides to donate some of their enormous wealth to a philanthropic cause, their generosity and public spirit are lauded. *Their* generosity will make a difference.

Jesus had a great deal to say about wealth. A few weeks back, the Lectionary took us to the story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man.

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus told his disciples.

They were aghast; they shared the common belief – the very same belief that we found in Job – that wealth was a sign of God's favour. Their reaction to Jesus' words, then, was bewilderment: if even the rich, whom God has obviously blessed, can't enter the Kingdom, then who on earth can? Like so many of us, the disciples held the rich in awe. But not so Jesus.

In today's passage from Mark, we have two short stories about wealth and status. First comes Jesus' warning about the scribes. Scribes were experts in the Jewish Law. Apparently they were not permitted to charge for their services, and so they depended on benefactors and charity. Yet they didn't act like people who were beholden to the generosity of others. Or at least the ones that Jesus spoke about didn't. Jesus makes particular mention of their long flowing robes. Garments like that

were a public declaration of wealth; you could not do manual labour dressed in that way, so their attire clearly stated that they were above working with their hands.

How could it be that people who depended on the charity of others could grow so rich? Jesus gives us one insight into that: *They devour widow's houses*, he said. That is to say, they would press their demands for alms on the most vulnerable, and unscrupulously ask for more and more from those who could ill afford to give. That *widows* of all people – among the very most vulnerable in that society – should be persuaded to give so much as to lose their only security, their home, was a stinging indictment of the selfish rapacity of some of this class of people. Their wealth was on the back of their ruthless exploitation of the most vulnerable.

What's more they demanded, and were given, great public honour. In the synagogue, they sat at the front, where the sacred scrolls were kept, facing the congregation. In public they expected to be greeted and recognised with respect. Were they to attend a banquet they were placed in the seat of honour next to the host. And they could put on a convincing show: their long, eloquent but ultimately hypocritical prayers were designed to let people know how wonderfully pious they were.

The scribes that Jesus spoke of epitomised many of the evils associated with wealth: greed, arrogance, hypocrisy and pride. The parallel with what we see with many of the modern-day wealthy couldn't be clearer. So what Jesus had to say about the scribes is important, and his words were damning: *They will receive the greater condemnation*. That pronouncement must have shocked the disciples just as much as Jesus' remark about the eye of the needle had done previously. How could it be that those who were the gurus of God's Law, who spoke such wonderful prayers, could be so condemned?

Wealth can be a dangerous thing. The author of I Timothy was well aware of the destructive effects that wealth can engender.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

What is at stake is not the money itself – it's the love of it. It's not hard to see that in our own very affluent world. It's clear that, for many people, the more money they have, the more they want. There never comes a time when they can concede that they have enough. Making, and accumulating, wealth seem almost to become an addiction, an obsession that distorts their sense of reality and perspective. I read some years ago that, based on tax returns and claims for charitable deductions, the reputation of Australians for being generous donors to charities disproportionately depends on those of low and middle incomes. The very wealthy are far less conspicuous among the nation's charitable givers. It seems that the more you have, the less likely you are to be generous. In the United States, over the last couple of generations, we have seen the very rich gradually seize control of the political process to drive through massive tax cuts for themselves, which have contributed to the nation's ballooning debt, and led to cutbacks in all kinds of social and civic services needed by ordinary people. In all too many countries, corrupt oligarchies have enriched themselves on the back of resources that rightfully belonged to the nation and its citizens. And the recent publication of the so-called Pandora papers exposed how so many of the world's richest conspire to shield themselves from scrutiny and from tax regimes that might require them to pay *something* towards resourcing of the nations that they so rapaciously exploit. Wealth, it seems, breeds greed, dishonesty and rapacity.

All that surely bespeaks the evils to which the love of money can lead. It tells us that the writer of I Timothy was correct in his warning. It goes a long way to illustrating exactly what Jesus was

talking about when he warned of the pernicious dangers of wealth. It should stand as a stern warning to us all, not only to keep our own attitude towards money healthy and wholesome, but not to succumb to the prevalent attitude that celebrates and honours – and *envies* – the very rich. *They will receive the greater condemnation*, warned Jesus.

The story of the widow's mite stands in stark contrast to all of this. Jesus and his disciples are opposite the Temple treasury, where passers-by are making their donations. The wealthy ostentatiously let everyone see the large sums they give; while a poor widow gives two small coins – we might think of them as two five cent pieces. The fact that she is a widow is significant. Mark has just told us how the rapacity of the scribes would ruthlessly rob widows of their homes. So here is one of those widows, one of the vulnerable, one of the victims. Yet she still makes her offering, not out of any abundance, says Jesus, but out of her poverty. Probably with some hyperbole, Jesus says that the widow “has put in everything she had, all she had to live on”. Poor as she was, the widow put into practice the maxim that there's always someone worse off than you are. She loved her neighbour as she loved herself. In touching contrast to the scribes, this woman has not been corrupted by wealth, because she has no wealth – and what little she has, she willingly shares. She offers a salutary lesson in achieving a healthy attitude towards money.

But there's more to this story of the poor and generous widow, because it's not only the scribes to whom she provides a contrast. You remember that story of Jesus and the rich young man, the one which led Jesus to make that remark about how hard it was for the rich to enter the Kingdom? What Jesus asked of the man was that he sell all he had, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus.

When he heard this, we are told, [the rich man] was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

It was not his money *per se*, but his *love* of his money, that was his undoing. Imprisoned by the selfishness and greed that great wealth seems to engender, the man could not bring himself to an act of genuine sacrifice and generosity.

So the widow provides a very clear contrast. That hyperbolic pronouncement of Jesus, that she *had* given all that she had – even what she had to live on – is surely a deliberate echo of what the rich young man had been unwilling to do. He, with so much, could not match the generosity of the widow, with so little. He, with all his power and status, was incapable of the same selflessness as one of the most vulnerable and powerless. The contrasting stories both hold the same lesson, of what is required of us to enter the Kingdom of God. And that is total surrender; we are to give all we have.

As Jesus did. For the exemplar in this lesson is not really the widow, important though she is. The exemplar is Jesus himself. It was not just wealth that Jesus sacrificed – indeed there is no suggestion that he personally had wealth of any kind. The disciples and he lived from a common purse that covered their basic needs. What Jesus gave was his very life. Jesus went to his death on the cross, utterly surrendering himself for the sake of others. Jesus achieved, by his willing sacrifice, what we were and are incapable of achieving for ourselves. Jesus is the one who truly stands in contrast both to the rich young man and to the scribes.

It would be easy to end this sermon with an admonition that we all need to be more generous – and we do. It would be easy to rail against the love of money that is so much a part of our affluent society – and we must guard against that. Difficult as they are, we must heed the lessons of the scribes and the rich man and the widow. But the good news is not that Jesus has burdened us with tasks at which we are ultimately going to fail; it's not that our place in the Kingdom depends on our ability to emulate the poor widow. The good news is that Jesus has already won the prize for us. The danger that *is* posed by our wealth is that our greed and selfishness might obscure from our

vision the desperate need we actually have. We do need to heed the warning! But when we realise our need and come to Jesus, he has already achieved for us all that is needed.

Amen