



### Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,  
open our hearts, ready our minds  
and fire our imaginations,  
so that as we gather together before you,  
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,  
we might discover more of your goodness,  
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit  
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us  
on our journey into fullness of life.  
**Amen**

### 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think about a time when you've judged another person on the basis of their wealth. What shaped your assumptions about them?

### Prayers of Thanks and Praise

*During this time, you are invited to bring your thanks and praises to God. Following this time, we conclude with the following prayer:*

God of all goodness and blessing,  
as we come before you in prayer and trust,  
knowing that you long to see all you have made thrive,  
we offer you our thanks and praises.  
**Amen**

### Prayers of Renewal

God of renewal and fresh hope,  
who challenges us to see ourselves truthfully,  
we bring to you those things in our lives and our world  
in need of your refreshment and renewal.

When we've valued status and wealth above following you,  
**Christ, forgive us.**

When we've lost sight of you amid the pressures of life,  
**Christ, refresh us.**

When we've been hurt by the words or actions of others,  
**Christ, comfort us.**

When our systems of government exacerbate inequality,  
**Christ, rebuke us.**

When your Church has neglected its calling to justice,  
**Christ, renew us.**

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

God of renewal and fresh hope,  
who challenges us to see ourselves truthfully,  
thank you that you forgive us, renew us,  
and set us free to live for you.  
**Amen**

**Reading**     Mark 12:38 – 44

### Sermon

Sometimes, the same thing can appear rather differently depending upon the angle we look at it from. An anamorphic image or sculpture is one whose appearance varies depending on one's vantage point,

such as *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein or the illusion displayed round Paris by Francois Abelanet in the summer of 2011 that looked either spherical or angular, from different positions. Within the Bible, there are passages of scripture with an anamorphic quality, and our reading for today is one such text. The extent of this can get missed, because some translations insert an unhelpful subheading between the two parts, but examining the whole from the perspectives of the Scribes and of the widow helps us build up the fullest overall picture of Jesus' teaching on wealth, exposing as it does the ambiguities of the religious institutions and systems of his time. In the process, this passage poses some challenging questions for us about status and wealth, and how these dynamics play out within churches and local communities today.

We find Jesus in the outer courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem, in what we now describe as the Tuesday of Holy Week. Having arrived in the city two days earlier, in a dramatic and purposefully messianic fashion, he had caused further controversy by overturning money changing tables and bringing the daily activities of the Temple to an abrupt halt on the Monday. This resulted in representatives of some of the key factions within the diverse Judaism of the day challenging him in the courtyard, in front of large crowds gathering ready for the Festival of Passover. His opponents had been silenced by his reply to one of the scribes, whose role it was to copy religious documents, and which often resulted in them becoming legal experts. Despite it having been a positive interaction (Mark 12:28 – 34), Jesus took the opportunity to teach the crowd, delighting them with his remarks on the Scribes as a unit (12:35 – 37). Today's passage picks up on this thread, with a blanket condemnation of their love of distinctive robes and being greeted respectfully in public spaces, their taking the best seats in worship and at banquets, and their displays of piety through lengthy prayers. Most shockingly (and perhaps harshly) of all, Jesus accused the Scribes collectively of devouring – or gobbling up – the

estates of widows, who were among the most vulnerable within that highly patriarchal society (Mark 12:38 – 40).

Now, if we look at this set of accusations from the perspective of the Scribes, who operated within a context in which material wealth was commonly associated with divine blessing, and where their role was viewed as bringing honour and necessitating respect, Jesus' words may well seem more than a bit unfair. They might also make us feel rather uncomfortable as Christians living in the UK, which is still one of the wealthiest nations upon Earth, and that benefits economically from the legacy of its brutal imperialism to this day. The imaginative power of the 'myth of meritocracy' – which claims that achievements reflect one's own ability and efforts and not the ingrained advantage of wealth – remains great, and it applies as much to collectives such as countries as it does to individuals. Consequently, a slightly softer version of the 'Prosperity Gospel' functions subconsciously in many Western nations, resulting in having something of a blind spot about how much more we have in common with the Scribes than we often care to admit. From the perspectives of marginalised folk struggling to survive, including the widows spotlighted by Jesus in Mark 12:40, it would be interesting to hear what they thought of his strong words. Did they think that the religious system the Scribes represented was devouring their estates, or did they instead seek its patronage?

The second half of our reading muddies the waters even further, as we see Jesus watching people go to and from the Temple Treasury. We are told that many rich people made substantial contributions to the shared pot, but he singled out for special mention a poor widow, whose meagre contribution of two copper coins represented all which she had left to offer to God (Mark 12:41 – 44). From the perspective of one of the Scribes who derived their income from the fee paid by folks visiting the Temple, one wonders if this sight would have made them feel guilty, or question whether the poor were being exploited? On the other hand, given that those people in that unnamed widow's

situation were not obliged to pay anything to come to worship in the Temple, it appears she chose to donate the last of her money of her own free will. Therefore, would denying her the chance to contribute as she wanted to have meant preventing her exercising agency and hence patronising and demeaning her?

When we try to hold these different views of the same story together and make sense of it as a unit, we quickly discover that nothing here is neat or straightforward. It won't do simply to focus on the widow's generosity, and state that we should emulate her, as it was because of the unjust structures of a deeply unequal society that she held so little wealth in the first place, having lost her husband. Analysis from several recent studies highlights how the majority of churchgoers in the UK are middle-class, and so we find ourselves in the same state as the well-off people who were able to give large sums of their own money without it denting their overall wealth too much (Mark 12:44). Is Jesus asking us to give up everything we have, as he did with the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17–22, who went away grieving because he had many possessions? Looking at this from the standpoint of a Scribe genuinely seeking to be faithful to God, but caught in the net of norms and expectations that made it incredibly hard to be like the slave of all (Mark 10:31), doesn't make things any easier, especially as we have already noted how much we have in common with them. The simple fact is that there is an inescapable ambiguity at the heart of both the Temple system and our own capitalist society.

When I was thinking on this passage, it reminded me of an occasion a few years ago when I was door-to-door collecting for Christian Aid on the same road I have covered many times previously. It was from the obviously less well-off section of that street that I collected most envelopes, and from the upper window of the house with the golden Porcha convertible parked on the drive that a bucket of freezing cold water was poured on me! While there were generous folk within the posher end of the road as well, it is a stark reminder of how research

shows it is the most deprived households that are most likely to give to charitable causes. Moreover, the donations made represented a higher proportion of the incomes of those in the social housing parts of that street than the larger figures given by the wealthier residents. The parallels with the widow praised by Jesus are clear, generating some uncomfortable questions for many of us in churches about the way we approach both the thorny subject of giving, and our attitudes to those who are visibly less well-off than ourselves. If there is some resolution of the ambiguities here, perhaps it lies in recognising that the widow's giving of herself was Christlike, in the sense that though in absolute terms her offering didn't amount to much, like the kenotic self-giving of Jesus, the point here was that she gave up everything she had for God. What would it mean for you to do the same? Amen

### **Recommended Resource of the Week**

Kathy Galloway's 2001 text *Walking in Darkness and Light* explores human capacity for change and growth, given the reality of our own shared nature.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

#### **Lord's Prayer**

#### **Blessing**

God of all our journeys,  
as we go forward into the rest of the week,  
may you be the light to our path and the breath we breathe,  
and may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Spirit  
be with us and those whom we love and pray for,  
now and forevermore. **Amen**