

International Mission Partnership Consultation

Sermon 29 August 2024, Östersundom Chapel

In facing Christ

Today's reading is from the Gospel according to Mark.

37b And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces **39** and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! **40** They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41 He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. **42** A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. **43** Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are

contributing to the treasury. **44** For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mk 12:37b-44)

This is the Word of the Lord. Please be seated.

It's good to be here, in front of your expectant, kind, perhaps reserved eyes. But don't look at me. Look around or reach for the person next to you. Who do you see? Who do you recognize? I, for one, recognize friends, old friends and new ones. Partners, friends, siblings in Christ.

It is meaningful that during this week together we have been able to meet face to face, to hear each other and to be heard - to see and be seen.

In today's Gospel that we just heard, people are the object of different kinds of gazes and looks. Jesus tells his listeners to be beware of the scribes. To watch out them, as if they really are a threat to those he is speaking to.

This part of the text is not an easy one to read as a bishop or any religious leader. How much of this is true! And since it is difficult to listen to – it most probably is helpful to listen and to hear.

But we are not going to take that track because Jesus' stern look at the religious leaders of his own community is not the most significant look in this text.

Jesus "sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into" it.

The crowd passes by in a steady stream to and from the temple. From the midst of the crowd, a group of people emerge. "Many rich gave large sums." They gave because they could afford it, and rightly so – even if they could have afforded to give more.

But we let them continue their journey because ... against the background of the crowd, Jesus' look picks out one single figure: a poor widow. Does anyone else see her? I doubt. She most probably wasn't the only poor person around. Moreover, her gift was so small compared to what the others gave, compared to all the wealth of the temple, so insignificant that the faint clink of two coins in the coffer barely caught anyone's attention.

But Jesus, sitting opposite the treasury, saw it all.

Now, let's look around again. Not around us here in the Östersund church, but let's look more broadly at the text we have at hand, the Gospel of Mark. Against that

background, the poor woman who put into the treasury everything she had, is not a lonely figure. There are others like her.

There is a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for years (Mark 5:25-34), a Syrophenician mother whose little daughter has an unclean spirit (7:24-37), and a woman who appears in the middle of a meal and anoints Jesus' head with precious oil (14:3-9).

All these four women have two things in common. First, none of them has a name. That is, we don't know their names, because it was considered insignificant. No reason to say their name.

The second thing that unites these women is that each one of them breaks the norms of the community, each one of them breaks out of the place assigned to them by others. They break the rules and the pattern – and they do this because of Jesus. Not because of themselves, but because of Jesus.

They cling their faith, their hope, their everything on God Incarnate. And compared to this, human hierarchies, familiar patterns and roles defined by others lose their meaning.

Many of us is wearing a badge today, Thursdays in Black. This tells about one of the patterns we are called to break. Finland has long been one of the top countries in Europe in terms of statistics on gender based violence. One in three Finnish women has experienced physical violence or its threat in their close relationships. And we know that this is the shared experience of far too many women and girls in far too many countries and churches as well. This is why we are called to break the pattern, to undress the roles given to us be it the one of victim, perpetrator or of survivor.

At the centre of Jesus' proclamation is the kingdom of God, which has come near - and at the centre of his action is the suffering human being.

This is why we cannot ignore the cry and the questions raised by the brokenness of this world as we look at the crowd passing by, as we join it.

This is why it is so important to gather together, to ask questions, seek answers, pray, to break the bread and share the wine, so that, in the midst of this fragmented reality, we do not lose communion with each other, with Christ, and with the mission that is at the heart of being the Church.

Christ has sent us to go and make, to baptize, to teach, and indeed to see every human been through the eyes of his love. And it is ok to admit that we too long for that same look, the loving, compassionate, reconciling look of Christ.

In facing Christ, each one of us is poor - and each one of us is already living in the abundant life of God's Kingdom. No more or no less is asked of us - of any of us - than that we give all we have. What a demand – but it comes with a promise.

Christ has already given us everything He has, His whole life that we “may have life and have it abundantly”. (Jh 10:10).