Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, "Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had. (Gospel).
First Reading: 1 Kings 17:10-16

10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.’ 11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’ 12 But she said, ‘As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.’ 13 Elijah said to her, ‘Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.’ 15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Responsive Psalm 146:7-10

Lector: 7 who executes justice for the oppressed?  
All: who gives food to the hungry?  
Lector: The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
All: 8 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
Lector: The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
All: the Lord loves the righteous.  
Lector: The Lord watches over the strangers;  
All: he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
Lector: but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.  
All: 10 The Lord will reign for ever,  
Lector: You are God, O Zion, for all generations.  
All: Praise the Lord!

Second Reading: Hebrews 9:24-28

24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. 25 Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; 26 for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.
Gospel Reading: Mark 12:38-44

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 market-places, \(^{39}\) 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.’

Homily

We who have grown up in Jewish or Christian tradition have heard the stories about the widows who share beyond their own means where their own survival is threatened. Such a story is found in both our First Reading as well as in the Gospel for today. There are aspects of this story that will give us deeper insight if we understand the cultures in which they arose. The word for widow in Hebrew carries the meaning of one who is silent, one who is unable to speak for herself. We should remember that in all of the ancient Mediterranean cultures, all activities were divided along gender lines, the men in public places and the women secluded within their homes. Women did not speak in their own behalf although we see a few notable exceptions in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. One exception in the Hebrew Bible is the beautiful story of Ruth, which we will take up at another time but a reading from the Book of Ruth is an alternate reading for this week. In the NT, we see women coming forth to converse with Jesus on their own, which would be highly unusual to speak with a strange male in a public place.

A widow is one who has lost her husband, and if there are no sons, there is no one to take her in. If her family of origin is still available to her, they might take her in; otherwise, she is homeless and without family support. We see that in the early Christian era, there was great concern for such widows as well as for orphans. Younger widows were encouraged to remarry (I Timothy 5:3-16) and older ones with no other means were to be cared for by the Christian community. Widows had no rights of inheritance. They lived from day to day, surviving as best they could.

We have commonly thought that Jesus was praising the widow in this story because she gave the last that she had for her own survival. She could have given one coin, keeping one for herself. But Jesus may be lamenting her behavior and using her story as a foil for his criticism of the Jewish leaders of his time. Religious authorities received the Temple collections which were to be redistributed to the needy but too often ended up supporting the authorities’ own conspicuous consumption – where have we seen this before? It continues to our own day in some churches and religious leaders. They were said to have “devoured the estates of widows” (Mark 12:40).

In their world, the cultural obligation was to do whatever you had to do to maintain your status and not to do anything that might jeopardize yourself, so her donating
everything may have even been seen as shameful, not something to praise. Jesus may be lamenting her adherence to a religious expectation that worsened her status. He is not criticizing her but is contrasting her sacrifice with that of the religious leaders.

Are there other people in our midst who have been cut off from their families? Who have been denigrated and rejected by those who would normally be expected to help them? Who are the “widows” or “orphans” of our own generation? They may be elderly people whose families have neglected them. They may be divorced people who feel displaced and unwelcome in our church communities. They may be LGBT folks whose families have disowned and rejected them and who feel as though they are outcasts in our churches. They may be people who have lost their jobs and along with the lost income their self-respect. They may be the homeless whose family connections have often been worn thin or completely disrupted. They may be victims of AIDS. They may be prisoners whose families have abandoned them. They may be injured veterans whose relationships have been impaired because their hearts and souls have been broken by war. We can think of many people who would fall in the broad category of widows or orphans.

The contrast between using religion for self-serving reasons and serving those in need is a message for us to consider today, especially as we move toward Thanksgiving in the U.S. and the Advent Season for all Christians around the world. How can we truly give thanks for all that we enjoy and not simply see it as a season for gluttony? How can we reframe the coming Christmas season to be a season of giving instead of getting? It is not too soon to begin to think about the meaning of the coming of the Savior in our lives. May we pray to reframe what is important in this time of year by finding someone else to honor and give attention. May we welcome all in our homes and churches.
Lord,
give us help
to do what you ask;
be it bake a bit of bread,
or give our entire lives
to care for your friends.

Let us trust your promises
just as the widow trusted.

Her jars of flour did not go empty,
nor did her jugs of oil run dry.

Christ
offered himself
on our behalf
just once,
forever,
to take away the sins
of the world.

Deo Gratias.

Two tiny coins were all she had.
no attention, no reward,
no place of honor.
She gave all
she had.

Jesus,
give us grace
not to count the cost.
Help us let go of our coins.
Take all that we own and all we are.

Amen.

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**Study Notes:**

**First Reading in I Kings:** A city known as Zaraphath, but in the LXX and Vulgate called Sarepta, was the first Phoenician city to be excavated by archeologists in 1970. Its location is ten miles south of Sidon on the seacoast and 15 miles north of Tyre. In the reading, Elijah was the enemy of King Ahab (874-853 BCE). The Elijah scripture cycle comes from the mid-8th century period of Amos and Hosea. There is a miraculous component in their stories, demonstrating God’s power through his servant who challenged the Phoenician cult that threatened Israel. He may have been in flight from King Ahab when we first encounter him. Ravens – those nasty birds who are friends to no one – feed him while hiding. A Phoenician woman accepts his demand to feed him before she feeds herself and her own son, and as a result she receives flour and oil in an unending supply until rains come to end the drought.  

**Second Reading in Hebrews:** Here, I have copied the commentary of Father Reginald Fuller (St. Louis University Liturgy Site, 11/11/12). It is very interesting to see how the early church leaders were dependent upon the Hebrew scriptures, which were the only recognized scriptures at the time of Jesus, and built parallels with Jesus as our high priest:

This reading continues the exposition of the high priestly work of Christ in terms of a series of contrasts with the Levitical priesthood. Here are the points made this time, some of them repeated from last Sunday’s passage, some of them new:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levitical Priest</th>
<th>Christ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>scene of his work:</td>
<td>the heavenly sanctuary,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a material sanctuary</td>
<td>God’s real presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repeated offering (yearly)</td>
<td>once for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>offered blood of other creatures</td>
<td>offered his own blood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last sentence of our reading seeks to elucidate the once-for-all character of human death. The reference to the *parousia* comes rather surprisingly here, but it is probable that all through this passage the author has in mind the ceremony on the Day of Atonement.

After performing his priestly work in the Holy Place, the high priest came out of the temple and showed himself to the people, indicating thereby that the work of atonement had been accomplished.

The *parousia* likewise will mark the completion of Christ’s high priestly work.

Note that the passages from Hebrews used last Sunday and today feature the two phrases that most clearly indicate the nature of Christ’s high priestly work in heaven: “he always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25) and “now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (9:24).

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