



Father Dominic Lenk
Homily, Thirty-Second Ordinary Sunday
Year B, 2009

In my hand here, I hold two small coins. These two small coins — each no bigger than the end of my little finger — are considered by some archaeologists and coin collectors to be the so-called “widow’s mite”. No, these are not the actual coins used by the widow in today’s Gospel. Though I wouldn’t be surprised if in some obscure church in Europe there is a long forgotten reliquary containing two small coins with papers claiming that those are the actual coins. Rather, what I have here are two first century coins which are similar to the two coins mentioned in today’s Gospel.

Regardless, these two small coins were all she had in her purse. Imagine if you will that before she left to go to the Temple she faced a decision that many people on a limited income face today. She could either use those two small coins to buy a couple loaves of bread — for that was the only thing she could purchase with them in the market — or she could use them for her donation to the Temple treasury. Now this donation was not simply for the upkeep of the Temple. It was considered to be a gift to God Himself. And as Our Lord told the disciples, those two small coins were “her whole livelihood,” everything she had. In effect, she had made a total gift of herself to God trusting that somehow a way would be found to put food on the table.

Today’s readings lend themselves quite easily to a reflection on social injustices of the first and twenty-first centuries. It would be quite easy to spend time and review the social teaching of Holy Mother Church beginning with Pope Leo XIII and continuing right on up to our present Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. But that would be too easy. Suffice it to say, that in helping those in need, the Church teaches us that we should give of our substance and not of our surplus. For as Jesus observed in today’s Gospel, the others “have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but [this poor widow], from her poverty, has contributed all she had, . . .”

Now while the social teaching of the Catholic Church is an important topic to consider, I’d rather spend time this morning reflecting on this idea of the gift of self as our gift to God. There is an old saying which goes something like this, “Our life is God’s gift to us. What we do with our life is our gift to God.”

It would seem that the widow in today’s Gospel was a woman of great faith. All we know about her is given in those few short verses that were read a few moments ago. She is quite a contrast from the widow in our first reading from the First Book of Kings.

The poor widow of Zarephath doesn’t seem to have even two small coins for which she could purchase food to eat. She is in great despair, for she tells the prophet Elijah, “I have nothing baked; there is only a handful of flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug. Just now I was collecting a couple of sticks, to go in and prepare something for myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die.”

Here is a woman who has given everything of herself, and — in her way of thinking — has nothing left to give. It is only when the word of the Lord has been



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



spoken to her through Elijah that she took courage and believed that the Lord her God would care for her.

It would not be surprising if the widow in today's Gospel was familiar with this story. Perhaps that is why she was able to walk up to the Temple treasury to deposit her two small coins. Her faith told her that the Lord her God would take care of her needs. Then, again, we have no idea what was going on in her mind. The Gospel is silent on this point. Was it an abiding faith in God's help or a sense of duty to the requirements of the law that led her to the Temple that day? We'll never know for sure in this life. All we have are the words of our Lord, who commends her to his disciples for her great gift of self.

One thing is clear, however, by giving the last two coins in her purse to the Temple treasury — in a sense giving her last two coins to God Himself — she was making an act of faith. An act of faith in which she prays, "Lord, all that I have I give to you. Do with me what you will."

I would like to think that when she left the Temple that day, she left with a sense of peace in her mind. I would like to think that even though her purse was empty, her heart was full of God's love. And even though she may have had no idea where her next meal was coming from, she trusted that God would provide for her

I hope you noticed as you were listening to this reading from Saint Mark's Gospel, that Jesus does not speak to her. He does not extend a helping hand to her. Jesus and this poor widow do not even look at one another. Rather, unbeknownst to her, Our Lord holds this woman up as an example to his disciples. He holds her up as an example to us this day. He holds her up as an example of faith and trust in the gift of herself to God.

Many centuries after this widow walked the streets of Jerusalem, Saint Francis de Sales would write of such an act of faith and trust in these words, "Give no thought to what may happen tomorrow. The same loving Father who cares for you today will care for you tomorrow and everyday. Either He will shield you from suffering or He will give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace, then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginings."

And so I ask you: in your relationship with God, have you given of yourself totally and without reserve, trusting that God will provide for you in every circumstance, both good and bad? Or, have you placed conditions on your relationship with God, holding back part of yourself until you received what you thought you deserved in your relationship with God? These are not easy questions to answer and if each one of us truly meditated on these questions, we may not like the answers that would be revealed to us.

For myself, I can approach these questions in this way. In some sense, my going to Washington to assist in the works of Saint Anselm's Abbey was a call to give of myself totally to God and His will for me. I would like to think that my response, my "yes", to spend three years away from home in these extraordinary circumstances was unconditional. I would like to think that I did not consciously agree to go only if X or Y were part of the plan. Admittedly, I must say that there were some days when I felt like the widow in Saint Mark's Gospel who seemed to trust in God without question, without reserve. But, then, there were other days when I felt like the widow of Zarephath from



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



our first reading who needed someone to remind her of God's providential care and concern.

However, I think it would be too much to say that the call to give of oneself totally to God only applies in extraordinary circumstances. Getting out of bed to face a new day is in itself a call to give oneself to God, because none of us knows what challenges we will face as each new day progresses. This call of giving oneself will persist until that day when each one of us is called from this life into the next. Yet, we can only persevere in this call by daily renewing our baptismal commitment of giving ourselves over to God's will through God's grace and by God's love.

Allow me to close this morning by sharing with you a prayer given to me by Abbot Luke when I was a novice. It was composed by Blessed Charles de Foucauld, a French religious of the early twentieth century who lived a life of shared friendship, silence, and prayer. His was a life dedicated to the total gift of self, as evidenced by this prayer which he entitled *The Prayer of Abandonment*.

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.

Amen.