

The Inclusive Community

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 8, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Money, Power, Values

Mark 12:38-44

Today's powerful and touching passage is about economics, power and value. The economics and the power reinforce each other so let us consider them together, in the first part of these reflections. Then we shall take up the question of value.

1. Economics and Power

The scene is in the Temple in Jerusalem, the epicenter of institutional religion. It is the Vatican or Geneva or Mecca of its day.

Jesus is presented by Mark as a careful observer. He seems to see everything and he holds up what he sees to a new value system.

What does he see?

He sees religion fueled by money, power, elitism, fraud, hypocrisy. It is not a pretty sight. He is revolted by it. He has watched it carefully, for a long time, and now he denounces it.

"Just look at the scribes," he says to the crowd "Look at them." A scribe, by the way, was something close to being a lawyer today but a lawyer who handled both civil law and religious or canon law. A lawyer who is able to advise on all matters of state and religion has a clear path to power and wealth especially if that person is unscrupulous. How do you spot an unscrupulous lawyer? Jesus says in effect: "Follow the money."

This is what he sees:

The scribes like to walk around in long robes, want the best seats everywhere and put on a show of being pious. Let us take these in turn.

Why would anyone want a long robe? It is not easy to walk in a long robe. Would a bride want to spend her days in a long wedding gown all the time? Could a Cardinal get on a bus or in a taxi with robes and miter?

A long robe gets attention – the bizarre always does.

The long robe says: “Look at me. Don’t miss me. I am a treat to look at. Am I not grand? Don’t you wish you were in my place? I’m important. I’m credentialed. I’m ordained. I’m accepted by all those who really matter. If you are worth it, I will look at you, remember your name, give you some time or a dime or my autograph.”

Long robes!

What goes with the long robes, Jesus says, are two perks.

- 1. Respect, deference when you go out shopping, in the marketplace. Strolling in public is downright exciting. People fuss over you and you give them the absolute minimum – a nod barely noticed or maybe a raised eyebrow or a quick look. That will make their day.**
- 2. The other perk is the best seat in the synagogue and, even better, the place of honor at all banquets.**

If you are managing a synagogue or hosting a banquet, you would not want your honored guest to leave in a pique because you put him (always a man) in the wrong pew or at a side table. The honored guest has not come to worship or even to eat. He has come to be noticed and to create a fuss. This is what he lives on and consumes. So he will walk out of the synagogue, long robe and all and out of the banquet if you do not pay attention to him excessively. Then, where will you be? All the chairs for those whose robes would wrap around the seat several times would be empty or filled with people who have normal clothing. God would be disappointed. No one with a long robe and a look of arrogance at liturgy or worship – what a loss! If you want me, my robe goes with me. Such a show!

In a parallel passage, Matthew, building on Mark, comments that the scribes wear broad phylacteries and very long fringes on their gowns. A phylactery is a little box with a reading from Scripture in it which one places on the forehead and the wrist to show you are attentive to the word of God. The scribes made the phylacteries so broad that they could hardly see or walk. But they got attention.

The human comedy of it all!

Then Jesus zeroes in on the critique. What is the source of this power? Money, he says. And how do they get the money?

Here’s the line: they rob widows of their property. It gets worse. And they do this piously.

What is Jesus really talking about? At this time, in Israel, a widow needed a trustee, a lawyer, to handle her estate if her husband died. She had no legal standing. The widow would often be assigned a lawyer and officials would often pick one who looked pious.

Piety in your resume helped. Jesus says it this way: they (the lawyers) "say long prayers for the sake of appearance."

So, it is not just a silly show – with robes and bows and good seats. It gives access to power, and money, sometimes from widows, the most vulnerable group of people in Israel. In our day we know you make more money by robbing the poor. The rich are hard to rob because they are astute and often compulsive. In the economic meltdown in America, a lot of the robbery was done to lower middle class Americans who lost their homes, their jobs, their healthcare.

Back to the widows! They had no money to pay a very pious and very expensive lawyer. He, therefore, took a large share of her estate as his payment. She was left with next to nothing to live on for the rest of her life. She often lost her home, her healthcare, her income from work. Jesus says, and I quote directly, to the scribes, you "devour widows' houses." You eat them up. You eat them out of house and home. And you do this piously, so piously.

This is a ringing denunciation of economic exploitation, fraudulent power, and hypocritical religion. And it is all happening in the Temple, at the Vatican, in Geneva and Mecca.

Beware of religious robbers. They are the worst, Jesus says. They never miss a religious service or the closing of a real estate deal.

2. Value

Now Jesus walks over to the ATM machine of his day. He sits down, opposite the treasury and watches the crowd. The treasury was where you dropped your donations to the Temple. It was a long, trumpet-like funnel in which you deposited your money.

So here is how it went. You had only coins. No paper money existed until it was printed for the first time a thousand years later. Coins are good. You can hear them clink. If they were large coins you could hear them hit the metal funnels hard. The rich came in a flourish and filled their hands with heavy coins. Their coins hit the funnels with a clamor. And everyone said: "Wow. Cool." People were breathless at the enormity of the gift and the people putting in the money often had long robes and very pious faces and were mumbling long prayers and often, blinded by their outsized phylacteries, had to be guided to the funnels. All the better. Such a show!

Scribes loved the Temple. Just think of the day they had. Lots of people! They get to wear the robes; they adjust their phylacteries; and fresh from the ATM machines they have a huge amount of coins in their hands. And now, best of all, all the clatter and the clunk of your donation. And the gasp of the crowd! What a day!

Jesus sits and watches.

Now a poor widow comes – embarrassed – no robe – no pious face - ashamed of her poverty. No deference to her. No one notices. She slips in while people are applauding the last clunker. She has only two copper coins – worth a penny. Today people leave pennies in the street. She would pick them up.

Get this. She is a poor widow. I think Jesus is making the connection. She is poor because one of the clunkers has robbed her.

A penny does not make much of a sound. She drops the lowest value coin there is, a copper coin and runs away. Only Jesus noticed that she put in everything she had. She would trust that God would help her to find food the next day. Mark says that Jesus calls his disciples. This is what he says:

“Did you see that? Did you hear that? No, not the scribes, the widow. Did you see her? No, not the last clunker. I mean the widow whose contribution was so pathetically small that no one noticed or heard it. She could not access the ATM machine. She had no ATM card. She did not have her hands filled with coins – only an embarrassed, clenched fist, hiding the poverty of her copper money. She slipped in easily between the clunkers because she had no long robes or huge phylacteries across her face. She slipped in as one clunker responded to the applause of the crowd. And she left the Temple quietly. Did you see that? They gave money. She gave her heart. They threw in their coins. She offered her love. They did it all for show. She wanted only God to see. They were criminals. She was their victim.

Did you see that?

Don't you ever forget what you just saw!

And when I am gone, don't you ever build a church for scribes and hypocrites and frauds and thieves and clunkers. Don't you ever do that in my name. If you do, you will lose the kingdom of God. This woman, this widow, is the kingdom of God. Don't you ever forget that. Don't you ever forget her!”