

SERMON PENTECOST 25 2024: WIDOWS AND FATHERLESS

O God, the consoler of the afflicted, you illumine the mystery of suffering and death by the light that shines from the face of Christ: grant that, in all the trials of our earthly pilgrimage, we may remain united to your Son in his passion, so that there may be revealed in us the power of his resurrection; for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN

Luke 12.43 Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 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."

The family of All Souls' includes a lot of widows. A couple of months ago, Deborah and I visited Pam Rowney who was added to that company by the death of Dean, who was incumbent of this parish from 1973-89. She invited us to dinner at her home in Aldinga Beach, along with David Seaton, our most recent widower. The Bible has a great deal to say about widows and the fatherless; about single women and childless women. But widows in particular, are frequently mentioned both in the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament. We have just a couple of examples in our readings today. Ruth was a widow who married Boaz. She bore a son. Our Gospel tells the story of the widow's mite. James in his epistle writes: 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.' (James 1.27)

The Hebrew prophets reproached those who wronged widows, and called the nation back to its God-given responsibilities. Isaiah declares, 'Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!' (Isa 10.1-2) Ezekiel declares 'The princes of Israel in you, everyone according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and widow are wronged in you. (Ezek 22. 6-7).

In scripture, marriage is a symbol of fullness in domestic life whereas widowhood symbolizes loss, emptiness and vulnerability. Revisiting the NT, in Acts 6 we hear a poignant account, 'Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in numbers, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task'. And so, Stephen and six others were appointed, whom we know traditionally as the first

Deacons. And in that very same chapter, Stephen 'full of grace and power' (6.8) would go on to cement his own martyrdom by his witness, faith and love.

Tomorrow is Remembrance Day, when at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of this eleventh month, people will stop and remember in many different settings. I will be presiding at the Remembrance Day Service at the Naval, Military and Airforce Club in Hutt Street. This morning, we will all share in a Litany of Remembrance. Lest we Forget.

In biblical times many women lost their husbands in battle. The same is still true today in too many strife-torn places on our planet. And sadly, right now, too many innocent men, women and children are dying in thousands. But most husbands tend to die before their wives because they are usually older, and women live longer. My mother became a widow at the age of 51. I became fatherless at the age of 17. (Dad was 54 when he died of a heart attack) Mum was married for just over 25 years and a widow for exactly the same amount of time when she died at 76. Many of you will have similar stories to tell. The biblical writers knew all this too well. It would seem more logical for men to marry older women and a few do (and I'm not including toy-boys!), but by and large the company of widows far exceeds that of widowers.

In my 50 years as a priest, I have also discovered that more widowers tend to marry again compared to widows. We men need our companions more than we dare to admit. Women are the stronger sex in fact! My mother once said, "Men don't know what to do with themselves; we women know how to potter!" - a generalisation of course, but in my experience, pretty close to the truth. Isn't it just wonderful that all kinds of quiet ministries happen to, with and amongst the widows of our church; perhaps we need to do a bit more about our single men?

That brings me to a related matter: hospitality. I sometimes get comments from widows and widowers alike that they get invited out less because they're no longer a couple. Single people also find that too. How about making a point of inviting a couple of single people to your next dinner party? I remember when I was rector of Burnside, that my associate priest, then single, Barbara Paul, now Barbara Paul-Hunt and married again, had a big dinner for the singles of the parish in her home, the old rectory, which was a huge success, and she just about ran out of room! We should all get to love the art of hospitality, and it doesn't have to cost much. Deborah and I have been invited by complete strangers in our street to a Christmas neighbourhood gathering, where we will take food and drinks to share. A great opportunity to network too. How special!