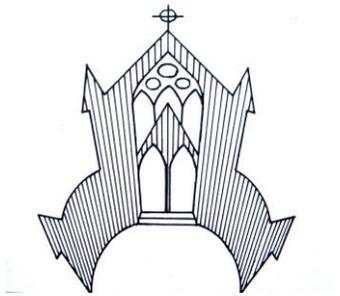


# Stokesley Methodist Church



**Sunday 7th November 2021**



## **A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources**

Eternal God, you call us to this time and place, to still our minds and gather our thoughts, to see the immensity of your giving to us.

You are the giver of life in all its fullness; the giver of gifts beyond compare; the giver of more than we can imagine or comprehend.

We come before you now.

Generous God, we come, individually and together, as your people to be resourced, inspired and blessed.

We come, thankful for the self-giving love of Jesus.

Inspired by his example, may we be generous and giving, with no reward other than knowing we are doing your will.

We ask this in his name. **Amen**

## **Lectionary Readings:**

**1 Kings 17 v8-16** (p358) The Widow at Zarephath

**Psalms 146** (p632) Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving

**Hebrews 9 v24-28** (p1207) The Blood of Christ

**Mark 12 v38-44** (p1018) The Widow's Offering

## *Giving Your All*

This week our focus explores living and giving generously.

In Mark's Gospel, this scene takes place just after Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and in the last few chapters before his death. The crowds love him, but the religious teachers are threatened and now begin, in earnest, to try to find ways to trip him up so that they can legitimately silence him. But Jesus continues to speak out.

Jesus is critical of the greed he sees in Jerusalem and its Temple; he contrasts the showy donations made by the rich elite with the tiny, but proportionally much greater, amount given by a poor widow.

If we include the story from 1 Kings, we are asked to consider two widows who give everything they have. The one who so generously cares for Elijah is left only with God's promise, delivered through Elijah's prophetic words. The generous actions of the other is used by Jesus to teach about the sacrificial giving.

The story of Elijah, the widow of Zarephath and her son, comes very early in the stories of the prophet in 1 Kings.

The dreadful famine is portrayed as God's judgement on King Ahab who, with his wife Jezebel, lives his life against God. When we join the story, Elijah has fled from Ahab and is a migrant in a foreign land. He has nothing and calls for help from a widow and her son who are also on the verge of starvation. As a widow, the woman is powerless and of no status. Yet, despite everything – including the risk to her own family – she generously feeds Elijah. It is a real step of faith into the unknown. In return God gives her the food she needs to survive.

Psalms 146 is a song of praise. The writer contrasts trust in human power with confidence in God – who brings justice, who never lets go

of his people, and who cares for the oppressed and the lowly. Or, to put it another way, the contrast is between God who is utterly and completely trustworthy and keeps his word, and the unpredictable nature of human power.

The Jerusalem Temple was a magnificent building that dominated the Jerusalem skyline. For the Jews, it was the sign that God was at the centre of their world; but buildings can take over and, instead of pointing to God, they can become the focus of faith. In the reading from Hebrews 9 the emphasis is not on the Temple itself, but what it represents. Jesus does 'not enter a manmade sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one.' Of course, the Jerusalem Temple was built by human builders, but it was built as a signpost for God's people.

Furthermore, Jesus gives his all ('he entered Heaven itself') in order to restore humanity to God. The story that is being told is one of rescue – but note that the saved are those 'who are waiting for him'. These are the people who resist the urge to try and rescue themselves, and are content to allow themselves to be rescued by someone else.

The passage in Mark 12 – beginning 'Watch out for the Teachers of the Law' – follows directly after the scribe who is commended because he was 'not far from the kingdom of God'. The story is set in the Temple precincts. Here there are scribes and other important people, but there are also the destitute. Imagine the scene. Jesus takes his position and watches people as they make their donations to the Temple. These donations would have been over and above the tithe and the Temple tax. But not only does Jesus watch, he also comments, He compares the gift by a widow who gives pennies and that of the rich who give 'large amounts'. Prefacing his words with 'I tell you the truth', he tells us that this is important, and we must take note. In these few verses, Jesus inverts the criteria by which we assess importance. What God sees is not the total given, but that the personal cost of the gift to the individual is the real measure of generosity. It is the heart of the giver, rather than the gift, that is important. The widow gives her all, probably literally, whereas the rich give from what they have left over. It is

generosity of a different order. As Jesus travels to Jerusalem and the Cross, he emphasises the total commitment that we owe to God – and how that contrasts with what appears to be costly discipleship, but which in reality has no real cost at all.

When does giving stop? The saying 'charity begins at home' is often used to limit what we give or do, and to whom. But, as the 17th-century clergyman Thomas Fuller said (and others since): 'Charity begins at home but should not end there.' Charles Dickens amended it another way: 'Charity begins at home, but justice begins next door.' How do both these sayings help us to understand the story of Elijah and the widow, or Jesus and the widow at the Temple?

In 1956, with the wounds of World War Two still raw, Shanti Solomon shared an idea with six other women of different nationalities. Inspired by Jesus' story of the widow who gave all she had, they formed the Fellowship of the Least Coin – a movement of prayer for peace and reconciliation, at first around Asia but now worldwide. The idea was that, regardless of social and economic status, or nationality or history, women could have fellowship and find reconciliation through simple actions and prayerful lives. And for each prayer said, at least one coin of local currency was given, and when collected, this supported projects around the world.

Can we think of practical ways to respond to God's generosity to us?

### **Sending Out Prayer:**

Generous God, make us generous.

Make us generous in joy, and generous in love.

Help us to remember what we have done today.

Remind us, every day, that we need to share our love for you with others, that we need to give and live generously – for you are generous God, our God.

Be with each one of us and all whom we love,  
this week and always.

**Amen**