

Many years ago I once asked Bishop Cormac Murphy O'Connor, as he was then, what a rich man had asked me that he should do, as a devout Catholic, with all his excess money. Cormac replied in jest 'Tell him to give it to the Church' and the jest depends of course on the ambivalent attitude we have, and perhaps are meant to have, towards the word 'church'. Something of that ambivalence is perhaps also appropriate to Jesus' story of the poor widow and the word 'temple'. For, as we can say of Church so we can say of Temple: 'Whose Church is it?' and 'Whose Temple is it here?' that Jesus is ultimately referring to. For he speaks in the context of its imminent destruction as a physical reality, or rather as a reality of wood and stone. What is going on in this story is much more than about keeping the temple going as an institution, including the maintenance of its staff – its priest, scribes and Pharisees. Indeed, they become the object of Jesus' anger for the misappropriation of funds given by such as this poor widow. What Jesus is doing, as always, is looking at the dynamic of faith – the human reality behind those words 'church' and 'temple' and what it really means to be 'church' and 'temple'. This does indeed revolve around the concept of gift, and its dynamic. For in one sense it's not the amount that matters but the spirit or power which motivates each of us, whether priest, scribe, pharisee or poor widow, in our giving and the totality of that in our lives. For, as in the first story of Elijah and the poor widow of Sidon- note a non-Jew- about to prepare her last meal, the power of the story depends upon the willingness of the widow to give all she has to a stranger, to a man not even of her own faith. This was as shocking then as now, and of course also in Jesus' time when the concept of Temple had narrowed to the preservation of a particular people in a particular time and place which had almost entirely displaced that of his people as a symbol of God's concern for all people. Think of St Peter's in Rome etc and indeed of all churches envisaged only as buildings and associated staff worth preserving for their own sake. I'm reminded of the pomp and ceremony at the canonisation of our founding saint, Bernard Tolomei where the celebration outside in St. Peter's square was enlivened by the many people present while St. Peter's itself seemed no more than empty warehouse without them. It's the people that matter – all of them - and their giving of themselves to God, or rather, with a dynamic of faith in mind, the trust with which we can give back to God in our giving to one another all that God has already given us. We give not in order to receive but to acknowledge that we have already received all we have and are from God. This is us as God's church, as God's temple.

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