

So this week St Peter's finally catches up with the rest of the parish with the final week of our sermon series based loosely round the theme of worship and music.

This week's theme is 'a new vision for worship', and it comes with what has to count as one of the shortest gospel readings ever (Luke 21:1-4).

My initial reaction to that reading from Luke, reading it earlier this week, caught me by surprise by how intense it was – and it wasn't anything to do with worship.

What I felt was a lot of anger about a system that made this woman think she had to give everything she had.

The temple system in Jerusalem by the time of Jesus stood for some of the worst extremes in human institutions and religion. It was a demanding, corrupt taxation machine that imposed unjustly on the poor and didn't exactly give back – and it did it in the name of religion. Socialist rant over. But to support that I don't even need to give you historical details. All I need to say is that that seems to be exactly how Jesus saw it – remember how he attacked the moneychangers in the temple, who had to be there because ordinary money couldn't be offered, it had to be special temple money, and this led to exploitation of those who could least afford it.

But if we stop at that righteous anger, we're not seeing the woman in the story, or indeed God in the story, and certainly not the whole picture. Jesus himself after all regarded the Temple very much as his Father's house when he visited aged 12. The injustices and corruption of the system were there, but just because we don't like that doesn't mean we should

ignore the value of the people who lived within the system, and see their heroism and generosity and struggles. (The same goes for today – it's very easy to dismiss people of a different generation because we don't like either how we think society is now or how we think it once was.)

If we start looking at today's story both in more human terms and in God's terms, we can start by realising that in Jesus' book, this woman is treble blessed already. We talked a lot about the Beatitudes earlier this year. This woman is meek, she is poor, she is mourning, so she is trebly blessed. And Jesus himself sees her and commends her, which has to trump all of that. She is a very blessed woman.

But then we might note that she also isn't actually doing what the system demands of her. The system didn't demand she give everything she had, just a proportion. I don't make myself popular in some circles when I say tithing isn't really a Christian practice, but it isn't. But in any case this woman isn't tithing. She's giving everything. We don't know why: perhaps she's giving in memory of her husband. Wherever this is coming from, it's generosity on God's terms, not human terms, and that takes us onto an entirely different level.

Human institutions at their best can be deeply philanthropic, but often they have a tendency to make demands, to take, and we're lucky if they give back, particularly lucky if they give back what we want or need. God has already given us everything we have and are, and when we offer it back to him, we get even more in return. Many of Jesus' parables are about that, about lavish return, about flourishing. And so are

his actions. Take the loaves and the fishes. The little boy gave what he had – and out of that, God gave back so lavishly that not only did the boy still have enough to eat, but so did everyone else there, and there was more besides. God gives back to us, but not just to us, but with an eye to others all around us.

And this is grace. There's a phrase about this used by the writer Ann Morisy. She uses the idea of a 'cascade of graces', to describe what happens when we take one step prompted by God, however small, and it then has a cascade effect, developing in all sorts of unexpected ways. You could also describe it as a ripple effect. There are lots of other possible analogies. But theologically speaking we're talking about grace, and if we don't stand in its way, it can carry on working its way into all walks of life and transforming everything that is touched by it. We might think about Jesus and the woman who touched his tassels, and how his power flowed into her and healed her. If grace is allowed to flow, reality can change.

If we go back to the woman in today's gospel, does the story stop where the gospel reading stops? Quite obviously no. What effect did Jesus' observation of her and comments about her at the time have? I've said she was trebly blessed. Did she feel that way? Maybe what he said made his disciples pay attention to her, maybe the reason the story is recorded is because she became part of the life of the early church, certainly what Jesus said impacted enough that it became a recorded story, and certainly it is a very striking story. It could of course be used to beat people about the head about how they must give their money to the church. And no doubt

has been, and always will be. But that is not what it's about, and that's a perversion of the story, if it's put like that, because it's about much more than that. It's about blessing and about grace and about the two way relationship of generosity we have with God and with those around, and how that can overflow and change reality.

I've found it difficult in this sermon series to focus on worship or music in my sermons. I don't think that's any coincidence. Both of them are important, but only because there are much more important things they can reflect and help us with. Today, we're thinking about 'a new vision for worship', and to me, looking at today's gospel, that has to be about grace. About whether our worship is truly an instrument of God's grace, about whether worshipping together has that ripple effect that then travels outwards through all the different walks of life we go out into each week. If we are prepared to put our all into it, everything God has given us, as the woman in today's story did, then not only will we receive enough nourishment, receive just as much back, but so too will all those around us, and there will be more besides. Let us pray each time we come together for God's grace to make that happen.

Amen