

Today's gospel reading is the story of the Widow's Mite – which has passed into language to mean a small contribution, willingly – even lovingly – given. The fact that the woman is a widow is significant, because widows and orphans were considered to belong to the *anawim* – 'those who are bowed down'; they were especially loved by God and they depended on charity to survive. They were among the most vulnerable of all God's little ones. The prophets and the psalms all urged the faithful Jew to please God by supporting them. Isaiah says: "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead for the widow." (1:17) And psalm 68: "God in his holy place is the Father of the fatherless and the protector of widows." And in Exodus we have: "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child." (22:22). The fact that such a person was the giver of money to the poor, makes this story quite remarkable. It is, if you like, a reversal of the social order: the rich came and put in a lot of money which wouldn't even have lightened their wallets; the widow, who depended upon charity herself, gave almost everything she had. The fact that Jesus tells the story immediately after warning his disciples about hypocrisy, is also significant – because the wealthy gave not because they particularly felt compassion for the poor, but for outward show. They liked to be seen doing good:

"Beware of the scribes who like to walk about in long robes, to be greeted obsequiously in the market squares, to

take the front seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets; these are the men who swallow the property of widows, while making a show of lengthy prayers.”

It isn't what we give that matters, it's the intention of our giving – the *way* we give. The widow gave her two small coins with a loving heart; the rich gave their money to make a good impression on others. There are so many reasons, so many motives behind nearly everything we do – and half the time we're not aware of most of them. Sometimes we might give out of a sense of obligation or out of fear that if we don't, God or life or fate or whatever will be angry with us. If we tell ourselves that what goes around comes around, our generosity might well be a kind of insurance policy. And sometimes – just sometimes – we might give not just with a conviction of doing the right thing, but with a loving heart. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said: “It's not how much we give, but how much love we put into giving.” This is true giving. More than this: when love gives, it always does so with a sense of gratitude – of thankfulness that someone has given us the opportunity to edge a little further towards the kingdom of God. This is the way it should be because this is how God sees things: we give with gratitude for being asked to give. In the Acts of the Apostles Jesus is even quoted as saying this himself:

“In everything, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words of the

Lord Jesus Himself: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (20:35)

These words do not appear in any of the gospels, but it is clear that Jesus said them; it makes us wonder how much more he said that wasn’t recorded.

And giving is not just about money – often that’s the least of it: sometimes giving of ourselves can be the most difficult and painful thing to do with a loving heart: our time and attention to a lonely person who needs someone to talk to, enthusiasm for a project that doesn’t really interest us, volunteering with our skills and experience when we’d rather keep them to ourselves. In the famous prayer of St Francis, *Canticle of the Creatures*, he says that it is in giving that we receive. It is only by giving that we receive more than we have. In the gospel of Luke Jesus says:

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you give out, will be the measure you get back.” (6:38).

This last sentence is the key to the whole matter: sometimes our hearts can be cold and hard and dry; there are always endless difficulties and countless failures; often we are weighed down by the worries, troubles and adversity in our own lives, or we at times just don’t even have the strength to try. But none of this matters, none of it. Because through it all, if we live as lovingly as we can from moment to

moment, at the end, when it most matters, we will receive love back.