

God finds compassion to consider the needs of the alien, the widow and the orphan

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 25 B – 1Kgs 17 8-16 Ps 146 Mk 12 38-44

The prophet Elijah was an amazing rebel during the time of Israel's corrupt King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They used to rob simple poor people and force them to worship false gods. But Elijah told them and everyone about the true God who gives to everyone equally. Elijah's was the prophetic voice of truth in his time. In every age, scripture calls to us to join our voices with voices like Elijah's – voices that tell of God's special love for little people; God's special love for the poor, the widow, the orphan, for children and for refugees; the little ones so often carelessly neglected.

Today's story about Elijah challenges us with this call to share life with God's little ones. Today we read that Elijah was sent to Lebanon – to a village called Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. There Elijah himself was a stranger; a refugee. Sidon is where his enemy Queen Jezebel came from. It's a dangerous place. And there, he's to rely on the charity of a widow; one of the world's nobodies a single Mum who, in a time of drought, has almost nothing left to live on. This story forms a pair with today's gospel where Jesus points to the trust and generosity of another, almost destitute widow.

On the face of it, they're both stories to make you rejoice – at least when we reach the end of them. But we're part of a world where pain is shared just as much as joy is. And so we can't pretend we don't know that those two widows are just

like countless millions more very poor people today. So what are we to draw from these stories; the two we've heard today, and what are we to draw from all the untold stories? Our Psalm tells us that God calls us to care for refugees, for widows and orphans. It reminds us of the ancient law in scripture that says God's people are commanded to give special care to these vulnerable little ones of God's.

Dt 24. 21 When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²² Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

Jas 1.27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

For thousands of years, God's people have responded to this call on the resources we share; a call on us as individuals and us as communities. We are meant to be communities of generosity and refuge. Our doors are meant to be open; we are meant to meet vulnerable people not with our strength, but in our shared weakness. We'd be just as vulnerable in their shoes. This is the example of Jesus himself.

The two widows were some of the most vulnerable people of their time. Whatever they lived on came from the charity of others. Both Elijah and Jesus were deeply moved by these women's predicaments, and how they were nevertheless so generous. But Elijah and Jesus didn't end the poverty and vulnerability of such people. It's the call to God's people to keep on caring for them that remains. And if that's all we draw from these stories, and it encourages our kindness to develop, then the stories have done their job. We know lots of stories that don't have happy endings. So many that they crush us. But even so, we know how we are to live.

What people are in that sort of predicament in today's Adelaide? We hear from some of them, but not many. Their situation silences many of them. Some have lost their jobs in their forties and fifties and haven't found anything since. Today we might recall the Vietnam vets who felt like no-one wanted them back here. And then there are people who are hidden because of our reaction to their mental illness, their addiction or their difference. And most significantly, we know about ever-more-marginalised Aboriginal people, so many of whose children grow up with their parents in prisons, and even many of the children themselves gaoled for actions that would never see any of us locked up.

We tend not to meet these people. But if we do meet them, we might often recoil from the aggressive behaviour of some of them, from the way they smell; from their loopy, long-winded conversation – just when we don't have time to listen. And we feel ashamed because of the way they make us feel for our collective failure. Our wider society doesn't think about Deuteronomy 24 or James 1.

There's a continuity here with the stories we just heard about the two widows. We saw that they didn't necessarily have happy endings. And the way our community fails our poor and different members sees them stuck in sad places too.

But each time one of us raises our voice—each time the Church or any other organization acts out of compassion and names the wrong that someone else needlessly endures, something like a resurrection happens. Someone who had been made to feel less than human has their humanity re-asserted. We might be asked why God would want to do that. Where would God – invulnerable, all powerful, all knowing God – find the compassion to consider the needs of the alien, the widow and the orphan; and why. As I pondered that with a friend, she dropped in the observation that God also knows what it feels like to lose an only child. Amen