

26/06/22

The Poor Widow

Mark 12:38-44

1. What are your thoughts and emotions when you read about the poor widow?
2. The story is yet another indication that Jesus sees into people's hearts and is not fooled by outward show. How does it make you feel to think that he knows your heart?
3. Verses 38-40 end with a statement of ultimate judgement on those who do not care for the widows. Is it enough to leave judgement and justice to God, or should we be working against injustice now?
4. 'Worship' can be both intimate Spirit-led adoration and ongoing service to the poor, the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner, etc. As we've seen previously, this involves a kind of spiritual 'breathing in' and a 'breathing out'. Do you feel you're managing to get a good balance between the two expressions of worship in your own life?
5. In the Church of England churches and church members are encouraged to express their worship/service of God in the five 'Marks of Mission':
 - i. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.
 - ii. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
 - iii. To respond to human need by loving service.
 - iv. To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation.
 - v. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Do you think it's possible for a church fellowship to give sufficient time and energy to all of them?

6. Have you seen or experienced churches where there's an imbalance and what indications of it are there?
7. Do you know of good examples of balance in a church?
8. The scribes and religious leaders thought they were rich, but in his observation of them and the poor widow Jesus highlights the actual poverty of their hearts. Do you think it's easier for the poor to seek God than it is for the rich?
9. How do you think the widow was able to give 'all she had'? What might have stopped her feeling bitter towards God? What might have given her a 'generous spirit'?
10. Can you recognise fear and insecurity in your own life that might hold you back from being generous to God and to other people? We may be talking about money here, but equally our time, our gifts, our overall generous spirit.
11. Proverbs 11:25 says 'A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.' Have you seen examples of this principle in your own life?
12. Equally, such a verse could be misused to make people feel guilty if they are not financially blessed, including the so-called 'prosperity gospel' prevalent in some circles. What really does being blessed or 'refreshed' mean?
13. Generosity is in God's own character, often talked about in terms of 'grace'. How can we keep ourselves mindful of God's grace and the need for us to respond to it appropriately?
14. Why do you think so many churches struggle to support their mission and ministry financially?

19/06/22

The Samaritan Woman**John 4:4-30, 39-42**

In Jesus's time a woman was unable to divorce her husband, only a husband was able to issue a decree of divorce, though this could be on any grounds. Any serious grounds such as adultery though would have led to her stoning rather than divorce. It was also a time of violence and disease and thus there was much risk to men living in Samaria. Furthermore, women lived in a vulnerable place in society, economic stability and protection came from the provision of a man, generally her father until marriage and then her husband.

1. Does knowing the cultural of Jesus time, change the way we read Jesus' response to the woman about her husbands? Does it change the way we think of his tone and meaning behind the words?
2. How do we view the Samaritan women? What do we think of her?
3. Is she an example we are inspired by? why/why not?
4. The most effective part of the Samaritans women's evangelism is her testimony, what makes testimony so powerful?
5. What would we say for our testimony, how is Jesus seen in our lives?
6. Are there any things that prevent us from feeling able to share our testimony?
7. The woman avoids social interaction by going to the well at midday, in our own lives what are the moments we go to the well at midday?
8. The Samaritan women allowed Jesus to transform her, from someone who had allowed fear to silence and socially isolate her to someone willing to face her town, how can we be encouraged to do likewise in our situations?

The Samaritans share the same ancestry as the Jews they live alongside, both are from the tribes of Israel. They both claim to be the rightful inheritors of the traditions of Moses and Abraham and the ones living righteously under the law. They both follow the Torah and are strictly monotheistic. Later traditions such as purity laws are rejected by the Samaritans as is the Temple in Jerusalem as they objected to its rebuilding. For the Samaritans after the 1st Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed the place became deconsecrated, and God's rightful holy place was on Mount Gerizim. This created much animosity between the two groups in Jesus' time.

9. The Women's question about where to worship, shows her desire to address the culturally relevant question. In our own context what are the relevant question? What are the barriers to faith we encounter in those around us?
10. Do we feel comfortable addressing these questions?
11. How can we feel more equipped and assured of God's presence to address relevant questions?
12. Jesus' answer, is not to place one over the other, but to show how that question is no longer relevant as the Messiah has come, it can be easy to get caught up in the particulars or debates of a question, do we make sure what we say points to Jesus?
13. How do we Evangelise to those around us in a personal and relevant way?

12/06/22

Mary (J's mum)

John 2:1-12

The empathy that you have for others going through particular situations in their life is of value to God.

Often this empathetic awareness and desire to help arises out of our own experiences; experiences that are not always easy.

- 1) Discuss how Mary's empathic awareness directly led to Jesus' first miracle?
- 2) God can act directly; He does not need our empathy (our prayers) to 'prompt' Him? But can you think of other Biblical examples where it does appear that human empathy plays a part in God acting and His actions.
- 3) Accepting that God can act directly, but often human empathy and prayer play a part, in what ways could our empathetic awareness be of value to God? (Is it that it has value because of the impact that empathy has on those that nurture it in themselves? What is the opposite of being empathetic?)
- 4) What are the experiences, insights, knowledge, training that you have that makes you empathetically attuned to something particular in the lives and situations of others? Action should follow empathy. So, what next – what action is your empathy directing you toward? (Don't be too hasty; listen well; hold the situation and the people; pray; invite Jesus in.)

Mary knew Jesus. How do we?

- 5) During the day, the week, where/when/how do you give the time needed to know Jesus? (In prayer, Bible Study, CG, inviting the spirit into your life, going for a walk and chat with Him, arrow prayers, prayer group, etc)
- 6) Share a time when the head-knowledge of Jesus, started to become heart-knowledge?
- 7) When it comes to faith in Jesus, why/when is head-knowledge also important? (Ephesians 4:11-15)

Mary trusted Jesus.

- 8) Many, especially the young, no longer trust (or turn to) established institutions like the Church. How we do, as an established institution, share our trust in Jesus in a way that is relational and not institutional? How we avoid do it in an institutional way? (Jesus did it relationally. The Pharisees, Scribes and religious lawmakers did it institutionally.)

Mary's request was audacious and confident.

- 9) What is the audacious request you want to make to Jesus today?

05/06/22

Pentecost. Breathing in, Breathing out

Acts 2

- 10) What is your own experience of the Holy Spirit?
- a) Do you actively routinely ask for the Spirit to dwell in you; to guide, inspire and comfort you; to give you wisdom, give you strength, the right words at the right time, tongues, etc?
 - b) Does having the Spirit in you make a difference?
 - c) Can you share experiences of where you have felt the Spirit make a difference?
- 11) How can we as individuals, Connect Groups, and as a church, live life and grow in our discipleship, inspired and guided by the Spirit? What tangible things have/can make a difference?
- 12) The Spirit is active throughout the Bible and from the beginning of all things. Reading through what happened on and following Pentecost as described in Acts 2, what makes it different/significant, compared to what had gone before?
- 13) Filled with the Spirit, Peter and the other followers of Jesus, shared the Good News and spoke words that cut to the heart, brought about revelation and repentance, and many came to faith. How do we (as individuals, Connect Groups, church), filled with the same Spirit, bring about revelation, repentance, and conversions? (Can we? Is it possible? Are we Cessationists?)
- a) What/where are the (cultural) barriers that exist that might inhibit growth
 - b) What/where are the (cultural) opportunities that exist that might enable growth
 - c) Do you know of examples, or experiences, where individuals, small groups or churches have done this well? What did they do? What did 'success' look like?
- 14) How do you currently 'breathe in'? (Hopefully, everyone will say 'coming to this CG'!)
- a) Where? When? What works/doesn't work for you?
- 15) How do you currently 'breathe out'?
- a) Where? When? What works/doesn't work for you?
- 16) From Acts 2, the rest of Acts and the Letters, do did the early church 'breathe in, breathe out'?
- a) What mistakes did they make/lessons did they learn? (eg. attitudes toward The Law, gentile circumcision, etc)
 - b) Are there equivalent contemporary mistakes that we make/need to avoid?

29/05/22

Huldah

2 Kings 22:1-2, 8-20, 3:1-3

- 17) What do you think the role of a prophet is and what do you think of the description of a prophet as, “someone sent by God with a message for God’s people”?
- 18) Huldah was recognised as a woman of God displaying integrity and spiritual insight, and this led the King’s advisers to come to her to “enquire of the Lord”.
- a) What does it look like to live with integrity and spiritual insight?
- 19) Why do you think people are tempted to simply say what they know people want to hear?
- a) How can we resist that temptation and instead speak truth?
- 20) Huldah had three options when responding to the King’s question:
- i) plead ignorance, ii) say “it’s all fine, don’t worry about it”, iii) speak the truth
- a) Why do you think Huldah chose to speak the truth?
- 21) What do you think about the statement, “we are all called to be prophets? That we each have a message from God to share”?
- 22) What might stop you from sharing this message? Think back to Huldah’s three options, do we feel tempted to choose option 1 or 2 over option 3?
- 23) Why do you think that many of the kings of Israel and Judah turned out to be idolators and bad rulers?
- a) What do you think is the reason? Why are leaders susceptible to becoming lost?
- b) What about our leaders today, do they suffer from the same temptations? What can we do to support them and hold them to account?
- 24) The importance of prayer, integrity and spiritual insight cannot be overstated when sharing God’s message if we are to resist becoming like the world around us, and if we are to share God’s message compassionately and effectively.
- 25) What do you think of the following two observations?
- “Our society is one where lies flow easily, where lies are spoken and accepted at every level”
 - and that,
 - “We need to be empowered by God, because it’s possible that, in the society we live – permeated by lies and half-truths – praying, standing, and speaking out for truth and integrity, sharing the message of a God who loves righteousness not falsehood might be one of our greatest tests of faith.”
- 26) Pray for each other that we would be empowered by God to be the prophets God is calling us to be.

22/05/22

Hannah

1 Samuel 1 – 2:11

Start by reading 1 Samuel 1:1-20 together

1. Whether or not we have experienced what Hannah experienced, we have all faced trials of some kind. What are some of the normal, human, responses to our trials (bitterness, blaming others, etc) and which do you identify with?
2. Hannah takes her suffering to God, knowing that he cares. Have you any encouraging stories to share of times when just the act of crying out to God has been a source of comfort or strength?
3. Have you any examples of when a story or verse in the Bible has seemed to speak into your own situation, encouraging you that God knows and validates your experience?

Read 1 Samuel 1:21-2:11

4. What do you think made Hannah able to leave her precious son behind with Eli?
5. How can Hannah's example help us in a situation where doing the "right thing" brings some degree of suffering?
6. Hannah giving up Samuel can be seen as a reflection of God the Father giving up his precious Son for us. How does it feel to see this from the Father's perspective?
7. Hannah's suffering seemed very unfair, but led to many good things for Israel and for the future. Have you any examples of God bringing good from suffering or pain?
8. What do you think of the idea of Kintsugi, repairing broken pots with gold to show off the cracks as part of the life and uniqueness of the object? How can God use our weaknesses, failures, and traumas to let his light shine through us?

15/05/22

APCM Service (not in the Empowered by Example Series)

Ezekiel 37:1-14

1. The scene described in Ezekiel 37 is a vivid depiction involving all our senses. Read through the description of the valley and notice what strikes you most, what captures your attention?
2. If you were in Ezekiel's place, being asked by God to prophesy to long dead dry bones and to bring them to life, what do you think your response would be and why?
3. Richard said, "This is the charge that God had for Ezekiel, to bring life to the dead, and it is the charge that Jesus had for his disciples, to bring life to the dead, and it is the charge that the Holy Spirit has for us – to prophesy to those who are dead in their separation from God and to [allow] the breath of God to bring them to abundant life in him."
 - a. How does this charge make you feel?
 - b. Does knowing that we are asked to do this not in our own power but in the power of God make a difference to how you feel?
4. Richard used the analogy of breathing in and breathing out to illustrate the life, mission, and growth of the church. That we should do things that allow us to take in the breath of God **and** be released by the breathe of God to breathe out and to bring and show life to others.
 - a. How easy do you find it to breathe in and breathe out in the breath of God?
 - b. What helps you to breathe in? Are there new ways you could try?
 - c. How might God be asking you to breathe out? What might help you to do this?
5. Perhaps pause as a group, focussing on your breath, breathing in and breathing out as you think about these questions and ask God to inspire you, energise you, empower you, and encourage you.
 - a. To breathe out, we must breathe in; to breathe in, we must breathe out

08/05/22**Ruth****Ruth 1**

1. Read Ruth 1: 19-21. Note the pain of Naomi's experience and her stating that the Lord 'has brought calamity upon me'. How do you respond to these words of Naomi? Do you feel it is OK for Naomi to blame God? Are we allowed/able to blame God in such a way? How do we respond when other's blame God?
2. In contrast to Ruth 1:19-21, read 4:14-17. It is through Ruth's commitment to Naomi, that Naomi is blessed and restored, and through Ruth's commitment to Naomi's God, that God has been enabled to do his providential will, with the birth Obed, who will be the grandfather of David, and of the lineage leading to Jesus. Reflect on how Ruth's straightforward commitment to Naomi and Naomi's God, has enabled Naomi restoration and God's will to be done through the events recording in the Book of Ruth.
3. Read Ruth's words of commitment to Naomi in 1:16-17. Where do you see in our culture today such selfless commitment? Where does our culture encourage and celebrate such commitment? How might our culture erode and belittle such commitment?
4. Considering question 2; What are the relationships, practices, that you are committed to that draw you closer to God's blessing and his will being done through your life? What could you do to build on those relationships and practices?
5. Considering question 2; What are the relationships, practices, that you are committed to (or involved in) that draw you further from God's blessing and his will being done through your life? What could you do to end those relationships and practices?
6. Consider your portrait, with the things beside you that you are committed to and that make you who you are. How does that portrait look to you? What, if you prayerfully asked God, would he want to add, take away, ask you about?

01/05/22

Rahab

Joshua 2:1-21

1. How do we view and understand the Bible? Do we read it as a whole or in isolated passages? What are the potential benefits and dangers of both?
2. Bethany spoke about how Rahab's conversion was quite ordinary. What little God moments have we had that we may have overlooked (today / this week / this year / in our past)?
3. Rahab explains how she came to faith in Joshua 2. How do we explain our faith to others?
4. In the face of a world which can at times be quite hostile to faith, how easy do we find it to publicly declare our faith?
 - a. Rahab faced danger and expulsion from her community for her faith. Unfortunately, that is still the case for many Christians around the world. This sermon series is "Empowered by Example." How do we let such Biblical and current testimonies empower us to share our faith?
5. What labels do we put on ourselves to excuse or underestimate ourselves and stop us from taking action? What are some of the impacts this has on our relationship with God?
6. What labels do we put on others that discourage them (often unintentionally) from their faith?
 - a. How do we go about encouraging others and removing those barriers to faith?
7. Read Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25-26.
 - a. Both these New Testament writers speak of Rahab. What does this tell us about how she was remembered?
 - b. Both look at a different aspect of Rahab's story: her faith, and her righteousness in deeds, how do we bring these two parts of the narrative together?
 - c. Reading through Hebrews 11, Bethany spoke about how the faith of Abraham is the same as the faith of Rahab and is the same as our faith today. How do you feel about being placed alongside such big Biblical figures?
8. Spend some time in silence thinking about what barriers lie between us and God, what labels we allow to stop us from stepping out in faith. You may want to share these or just pray and place them into God's hands.

24/04/22

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah, & Tirzah

(The 5 Daughters of Zelophehad)

Numbers 27:1-11

1. As we begin our sermon series, “Empowered by Example: Women in the Bible”, why do you think testimonies can be so powerful, even those of people many centuries or cultures ago?
2. Richard said that “we are not only inspired by people who are like us but also by people who are quite different from us.”
 - a. Who inspires you and why?
3. What do you think is the difference between only being inspired by the women in the Bible and also being inspired and empowered by the God who inspired and empowered them?
4. The 5 daughters took their appeal to “The Tent of Meeting” where typically only high-ranking men were allowed. What do you think gave them the determination to take their appeal to this place?
5. How do you think the words of God, “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying” made the daughters feel?
 - a. What do you think the rest of the assembly gathered round thought?
 - b. Can you think and share any parts of the Scripture that have affirmed and encouraged you?
6. What do you tend to lean upon for your identity, or feel society dictates is important in determining who we are?
 - a. Encourage each other to remember that God affirms you for who God created you to be; you are valued and precious in God’s sight
7. The 5 daughters spoke out against an implementation of God’s law which was not just and this brought change.
 - a. What things have you observed that are unjust? Where and how might you need to take a stand in the boldness of knowing you are affirmed by God and that all people are of significance, importance, and value?
8. Looking ahead to the rest of the sermon series, pray for all of us to be inspired and empowered by the God who inspired and empowered the women whose stories we will be looking at together.