

Dorset South & West Written service for 7th November 2021, by Revd Brenda Stephenson

Call to worship

Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry. (verses from Psalm 146)

Hymn 171

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long.
Let every heart prepare a throne
and every voice a song.

He comes the prisoners to release
in Satan's bondage held.
The gates of brass before him burst
the iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
your welcome shall proclaim,
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with your beloved name. Philip Doddridge 1702-1751

Prayer

Loving God, we thank you that you are a God who cares for the poor and needy in our societies.
In Jesus we see that purpose put into action through his teaching and healing ministry and the way he came alongside all those he met.
Thank you too for those organisations who continue this work and anything we have been able to do to contribute to them.
Now, as we listen for your word to us today, give us listening ears and open hearts we pray. Inspire our minds and our worship through your Spirit.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Readings

1 Kings 17:8-16 The Widow of Zarephath

8 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah, saying, **9** "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." **10** So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." **11** As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." **12** But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." **13** Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. **14** For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth." **15** She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as

well as he and her household ate for many days. **16** The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Mark 12:38-44 Jesus Denounces the Scribes

38 As he taught, h

Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, **39** and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!

40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

The Widow's Offering

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. **42** A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. **43** Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. **44** For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Hymn 466

Have faith in God, my heart,
trust and be unafraid;
God will fulfil in every part
each promise he has made.

Have faith in God, my mind,
for when your light burns low,
God's mercy holds a wiser plan
than you can fully know.

Have faith in God, my soul;
his cross for ever stands,
and neither life nor death can pluck
his children from his hands.

Lord Jesus, make me whole;
grant me no resting place,
until I rest, heart, mind and soul,
the captive of your grace. Bryn Rees 1911-1983

Address

Calling all widows?

I imagine that quite a few widows and widowers will be reading this.

Others will have been divorced or separated from their spouses.

The experience of loss can make you very vulnerable.

And this seems to be a Sunday when the readings are especially for you. We'll see if that's so.

Certainly both our bible readings concern the actions of widows.

Now ancient Israel was not a welfare state. The extended family would have had a greater role in the care and provision for those who had lost their husbands. But there would have been no state grants or pensions. The New Testament presents us with a varied picture. Some widows seem to have owned land and been relatively well provided for. However widows were often in a vulnerable position, open to abuse from the powerful. Jesus denounces the scribes for various actions including "devouring widows' houses." And the widow with her offering of two small copper coins had very little to call her own. There are also verses in the Law of Moses where God requires his people to care for orphans and widows – clearly an indication that this needed to be done by the local community. And in the New Testament there are quite detailed instructions for the care of widows in the first letter to Timothy.

The first thing to notice is that God obviously believes in providing for the most vulnerable in society. He does this in the Old Testament by telling those with greater resources to care for them. It's seen too in the healing ministry of Jesus and what he said about it. In Luke, quoting Isaiah he says:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners,
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

This is a call to love far wider than widows, or those who have lost their partners in life. Whatever the Bible has to say about the care of widows should therefore be broadened to refer to all those in the greatest need.

Who would you include in that category?

Is there anything you can do to show care for people in that situation?

The second thing, the characteristic which our two stories have in common, is that widows are held up for us as examples. That may well be a surprise. In view of what I've just said above, that also suggests that the vulnerable, however that vulnerability shows itself, may also be the ones to set us an example.

In both stories the widows were willing to share the very little they had.

Indeed they had so little, that what they did, in giving away the last of their meal and oil or money, had to be done as an act of faith. How were they to survive? They didn't know. The widow of Zarephath acted at the request of Elijah and with his words of God's promise ringing in her ears. She believed him. She put her trust in God's promises. We don't know why the woman in Mark's gospel put all she had into the treasury. Perhaps it was out of great gratitude for something she believed God had given her. And the way that faith was honoured? In the first case the promises of God were fulfilled. In the second, Jesus commends the widow and says that her offering is priceless. Faith, trust, is rewarded – though, of course, you don't know that will happen when you exercise it.

So these readings are not really for widows, widowers and divorcees. Except to point out that you may be the ones to set an example for others. Both a privilege and a responsibility I should think.

No this refers to a much broader percentage of society. And we are being challenged to learn from them and provide resources for them.

Have you recognised being set an example by someone in a vulnerable situation?

If so, how did you respond?

If it was a surprise, were you able to accept it?

And by the way, the widow at Zarephath was a foreigner.

Prayers

Spend a little time looking again at the readings or reflecting on what you have heard and thought.

Dear God, through the inspiration of your Spirit, help us to retain those thoughts and ideas that can feed us, as your people, in coming days.

And hear us as we pray for the world we live in.

We pray for the earth as COP 26 is in progress.

Give wisdom, courage and inspiration to those who meet to try prevent catastrophe and to provide a better future for coming generations.

Help people across the world to be willing to make sacrifices for the good of others.

We pray for the nations and their leaders dealing with the Covid pandemic. We thank you for our own health service and those who work in it.

Give guidance and direction to those in all levels of government who have difficult decisions to make.

We pray for vulnerable people, whom you love and want to strengthen.
(particular individuals or groups may come to mind; remember them.)
As you showed us your vulnerability in Jesus Christ help us to value those
who face difficulty and find ways to give them confidence.

Finally we pray for particular individuals who are in our thoughts and on our
hearts. We remember them, and their needs, and your love for them.
We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen

Hymn 79

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath

and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my nobler powers;
my days of praise shall ne'er be past,
while life and thought and being last,
or immortality endures.

Happy are those whose hopes rely
on Israel's God! He made the sky,
and earth and sea, with all their train;
his truth for ever stands secure;
he saves the oppressed, he feeds the poor,
and none shall find his promise vain.

He Lord pours eyesight on the blind;
the Lord supports the fainting mind;
he sends the labouring conscience peace;
he helps the stranger in distress,
the widow and the fatherless,
and grants the prisoner sweet release.

I'll praise him while he lends me breath;
and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my nobler powers:
my days of praise shall ne'er be past,
while life and thought and being last,
or immortality endures. Isaac Watts 1674-1748

Blessing

May God's richest blessing, which he wants us to know, rest on us and stay with
us, now and always. Amen.