*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

Sermon for Proper 27, Year B

# The Text: Mark 12:38-44

The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It is a common social issue. Most societies have their ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. These days we call it wealth inequality.

We like to think that in our nation we have a high level of fairness and equality. But the figures show the opposite.

A recent report says that the two richest people in Australia (the figures are probably similar in New Zealand) own more wealth than the poorest 30% of the population combined. Ten percent of the population own more than half the nation’s wealth. As a nation our wealth is growing, but not everyone is benefitting. Those who are wealthy are able to collect a lot more wealth. Those who are poor continue to struggle to just survive.

There are huge wealth inequalities in most countries. And in most countries the gap is getting bigger. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer or staying just as poor and desperate.

Why? It is not too hard to work it out.

Our economies are systems that enable a society to function. Ideally everyone contributes, and everyone is rewarded for their efforts. Those who cannot make a productive contribution are still provided for.

Most people would like to be richer than they are. There is something in us, I think it is human greed, which says that we would like to be richer. I suspect that all, or most, or us would like to be richer - either with more stored up, or with more to spend, or both.

We may like to be richer. But who can become richer? Those who have the money, which enables them to make money.

But it is not just about having money - it is also about having power and influence.

We hear plenty of stories about corrupt dictators who use their power to amass vast fortunes for themselves. Or wealthy business owners who bribe the politicians to bend the rules so they can continue to make money without any restrictions.

But even in a relatively honest and regulated country we still hear how business owners make donations to political parties, with the expectation that, if the party is in government, they will make sure that the political decisions run in their favour.

So the wealthy elite can get richer by controlling the markets, by reducing the prices paid for the goods and increasing the prices they charge for those same goods by avoiding taxes which support the common good and by keeping wages as low as possible.

Power and money are tied together to control who gets the wealth.

And sometimes there is another factor. Sometimes religion is used to gain the power that controls the money. In our history societies with religious power also had political power. Think of the medieval popes and bishops who had extravagant lifestyles because they wielded huge political power and made lots of money at the expense of their people. Think of some of the modern cults who hold power over their followers and convince them to part with lots of money.

Does God care about the economy? Does God care about political systems? Does God care about how religious leaders use their influence? Does God care about money? Does God care about people? Does God care about people who are poor?

Yes! He does. We heard in today’s Gospel reading. Jesus cares! And Jesus confronts greed and exploitation.

Jesus shows that it is not just an economic problem, not just a political problem. It is also a spiritual problem, because it speaks about our relationship with our God.

Jesus confronts the rich of His time on Earth, who were abusing their power. He talked about the teachers of the law. The teachers of the law are religious leaders, scribes, who were given authority to interpret and apply all of the laws of the Old Testament.

This meant that the Scribes and teachers of the law had a lot of influence. They became virtual judges in all sorts of issues of daily life. They decided what is right and what is wrong. They instructed the people on what they should do – how they should live.

Jesus points out how the Scribes and teachers liked their status. They want to be seen, and they want people to look up to them: They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplace. They like to have the most important seats in the synagogues, and the places of honour at banquets.

The problem was that they used their power and status for their own self-interest. Jesus then exposed their callousness and hypocrisy: they are the ones who devour the houses of widows.

What Jesus seems to be referring to is this: the teachers of the Law or Scribes have persuaded citizens to write bequests that give their houses and property to themselves or their institutions. Then, when they die, their widows are left homeless and destitute. Or possibly, they have the role of settling the affairs of a widow after she has lost the husband she relied on. But these lawyers charge exorbitant fees that leave her with nothing.

The teachers of the law were supposed to apply the laws of the Old Testament – laws which provided for widows in their society. At a time when a widow was especially vulnerable, the laws gave instruction on how there were always provision for widows, for refugees, and for others in need. But now those who should have been protecting the needy were exploiting them and making them poorer.

Jesus exposes the teachers of law and scribes in their hypocrisy. …for a show they make lengthy prayers.Maybe they are praying for the poor. But it is a pretence. They don’t really care. They want to impress people. They are not committing to God or to God’s will.

Jesus speaks of God’s judgment on them: theywill be punished most severely.Like all people, they are accountable to God for what they are, and how they think and act. God sees their greed and exploitation. God sees the damage they are causing. God sees through their hypocrisy.

Then Jesus and His Disciples went inside the Temple. Within the Temple courts were offering boxes with big funnels on top, where people put their offering as they came to worship.

The Disciples noticed that there were some people who made large contributions. They could hear the coins rolling down and falling into the box.

Jesus noticed a widow, head covered, who no one else even noticed. He heard her offering. It was just a tinkle – two of the smallest coins you could get.

Perhaps she was one of the widows who had been done out of her property. But Jesus did not comment on any injustice she had suffered. He did comment about her gift.

Jesus is more interested in her. Jesus compares her with the large contributors. They were rich. She was poor. They gave large gifts. She gave a tiny little gift.

But Jesus has a different way of measuring. “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

What did Jesus see? He saw her giving as an act of total dedication. She held nothing back. He interpreted her giving as a statement that her whole life belonged to God.

And Jesus sees in her giving an act of trust. She showed that she trusted that even when she had given away everything, God would provide for her.

Jesus did not just compare those who gave a lot with those who gave a little. He compared those who were willing to give with those who were out to get.

Jesus compared the ones who used their religion as a means to power and influence and wealth, with one whose spirit was dedicated to giving and serving and trusting.

He compared those who made others poor without even noticing or caring, with someone who found great satisfaction even in her poverty.

Perhaps Jesus even saw something of Himself in this widow. Later on Paul would tell of Jesus: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

As far as we know Jesus never had much money. But He became poor by coming into our world to be our Saviour. He gave what He had, by giving His whole life as an act of service, and finally giving Himself as a sacrifice for our salvation, as we heard in today’s reading from Hebrews.

Jesus gave everything, Jesus gave Himself, for the sake of all of us, all of us who were spiritually destitute. He made us rich by restoring life in its fullness.

This is the spirit of grace and generosity which we learn from Christ. And we see an example in this widow.

So what does it mean for us? I don’t think it means that we are supposed to put all of our money in the offering bowl. I don’t think that it means that we have to empty our pockets and empty our bank accounts.

Jesus is not asking us to put all of our means on the offering plate. But He is asking us to dedicate ourselves to Him, and to dedicate all that we own to Him, no matter how rich or how poor we might be.

This happens when God shapes our attitudes to everything we own, and to all the money which we possess: the money which we save and the money which we spend, the money which we use to support our families and the money which we dedicate to helping others further away, and the standards of comfort which we set for ourselves. It means, too, that we are dedicated to serving God with our gifts, in whatever way we are able to do that, and that we will do so willingly and cheerfully.

We don’t have to seek to be wealthy, and to get wealthier and wealthier. Our Lord teaches us the wonderful grace of contentment, when we know that our life is fulfilled through our relationship with our Father in heaven through faith in him.

This means we can be socially aware and responsible in our economic decisions as we follow Jesus in concern for the poor in the world. It means we can grow in political awareness, looking for candidates to elect with policies which will take responsibility for caring for the most needy in the community, and who are sensitive to the needs of vulnerable groups.

And it means we will see our faith as not just being concerned with ourselves and what we need, but as walking with our Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in Him, serving Him, and giving generously of ourselves. That’s a different kind of riches. We are rich and as we live with our Lord, we become richer and richer.

Amen.