**Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.** (Luke 21: 1-4)

One day, as Jesus was teaching people in the temple and telling the good news, he looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.’

**This is the gospel of the Lord.**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

A story is told that, while walking near Balmoral, Queen Victoria got caught in the rain. Calling at a cottage, she was grudgingly offered a rather tatty umbrella. She went on her way and the next day a courtier in a splendid car returned the umbrella. As the courtier left, he heard the owner say: If I had known who she was, she could have had my best umbrella.

The story of the widow’s mite is a bit like that: short and pithy. Those four verses are really all it takes. Why give your best umbrella when you can give something you don’t care about? Unless, of course, you recognise that it’s the queen you’re giving it to…

Few passages in the bible speak quite so directly about giving as this story of a widow’s donation of all that she had. And clearly it has implications for what we teach and learn about stewardship. This story has been taken as evidence that giving is a matter of the heart and that God is not interested in the actual amount that we give. So it is only a very small step from there to justifying both a small gift when more is possible and justifying secrecy in giving which seems to find some confirmation in Jesus’ teaching about giving in secret. HOWEVER…

The story begins with Jesus positioning himself where he can see what people give, as indeed can others. The action takes place in the temple treasury, where there were apparently a number of rooms for keeping valuables in. There were also 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles for offerings of different types in a room just off the court of women – remembering that men and women were required to be kept separate from each other in the temple. It is possible that offerings were declared verbally to the priest and that was how Jesus knew what was given. The privacy of much of our giving practice stands in sharp contrast to the joyful and public nature of offerings in many parts of the worldwide church, both here and overseas.

So here we are with Jesus in the temple, and he is watching the giving of both rich and poor, and notices that those with lower incomes seem to give proportionately more that those who were wealthier. But what really drew his attention was the giving of a poor widow who in percentage terms gave far more than the rich people who had gone before her.

It is easy to miss the point of this story. It does not teach us to give till we are poor. Nor to give absolutely all we have. But neither is the point that only the heart matters to God - so that we might justify a small gift or donation. If that were the case, then salvation could not have come to Zacchaeus, who gave only half of what he had. But last week, we heard very clearly that salvation was a present not a future event, and that it did indeed come to the tax collector, Zacchaeus.

The point of this story is not that the widow gave the last bit that she had, but that she gave the best she had. The widow’s mite is an acceptable gift because it is given both with the widow’s heart and on the widow’s income.

Some people have suggested that the two lepta which the widow gave was the minimum that could be given, but apparently a single lepton was acceptable as a gift. If this is true, the widow could have given less than she actually did. But she didn’t.

The issue, then, is not how much we give, but a far deeper question: how much of me and the life God has given to me, is truly reflected in the gift I give?

Jesus was watching those gifts being given in a particular context: the place of worship. The splendour of the temple speaks – as this and many of our churches do - of God’s glory, but also – and more vitally, I think - of his presence with his people. That is the context in which we give. If, when it comes to the offertory, we really understood who we were giving to, then whether we have much or little, we would give our ‘first fruits’; our first and best, not what is left over when we have accounted for everything else we want. Note ‘want’, not ‘need’. Back to Queen Victoria’s umbrella again.

If we could only see the difference the ministry of our church makes in people’s lives, our giving would go beyond calculation of its needs and how deserving we think those needs are.

If we knew that God was the originator and giver of all we have and are, then our giving could never be casual, begrudged or reluctant. Christian generosity is rooted in the generosity of a God who never stops giving to us and invites us to be caught up in the grace of that giving. The gospel calls us to radical giving and in this gift the widow is the very example of discipleship.

Discipleship around money does not begin and end with personal generosity. There also has to be a challenge to our attitudes: to giving in proportion to income and to commitment to justice and ethical dealings. Stewardship is more than the generous, personal response of the individual to what God has done in and for them. The act of generous giving is prophetic too: it is a specific challenge to inequalities both of income and of opportunity.

The personal generosity of the widow who gives everything she has is a standing judgment on those who give lots but keep for themselves more than enough in order to demonstrate both show and status. There is a real sense in which our giving is truly measured by what we have after we have given. In that sense the widow has indeed given a great deal more than the wealthy.

Sir Moses Montefiore was a Jewish banker and philanthropist in Victorian London, related by marriage to the Rothschild family. He donated large sums of money to causes ranging across industry, business, economic development, education and health, and was renowned for his sharp wit. One story told about him, possibly apocryphal it has to be said, tells that at a dinner party he was once seated next to a nobleman who was known to be anti-Semitic. I relate it as a sort of antidote to the current stories of anti-Semitism coming out of political circles in recent weeks. The nobleman told Montefiore that he had just returned from a trip to [Japan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan), where, he said, they have neither pigs nor Jews. Montefiore is reported to have responded immediately: in that case, you and I should go there, so that Japan will have a sample of each.

However, much more to the point, he was once asked how much he was worth. Pausing for a moment Sir Moses named an amount of money. The person asking the question demurred: surely he was more wealthy than that? Sir Moses replied: You didn’t ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I am worth. So I calculated how much I have given to charity this year. **You see, we are worth only what we are willing to share with others.**

So here is the challenge for us today. Can we say about our own giving that what we give reflects both what God has given to us and our relationship with God?

There is always a danger of inserting a mental wall between our talk of being generous and the gift that we actually give. Do we too easily affect a generous attitude while actually giving a gift that is inconsistent with generous living?

I finish with a brief prayer from Augustine: Teach us, O Lord, this difficult lesson: to manage conscientiously the goods we possess, and not covetously to desire more than you give to us.

**Amen**