

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – eleven

### *Jesus and the sacrificial widow – Mk 12.41-44*

This is one of a number of '**encounters in Mark's Gospel**' each of which enables a small-group conversation around a particular story in Mark's Gospel. These conversations aim to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** in actively exploring bits of the Bible
- **make connections** between the biblical story and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from watching and talking freely with each other about encounters between Jesus and those he meets – as we find them recorded in Mark's Gospel.

#### INTRODUCTION

This eleventh **encounter in Mark's Gospel** finds Jesus sitting in the heart of the temple in Jerusalem watching people putting their offerings into the treasury. A widow catches his eye and catches his heart – why is that? With the help of Gerald West, we explore the layers of meaning in a gift of a couple of copper coins. What will we learn as we watch Jesus watching her and hear what he says about her to his followers?

#### STRUCTURE

Each of your **encounters in Mark's Gospel** will follow the same basic structure:

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Sharing the story of the encounter
3. Our initial reactions - sharing our own first responses
4. Extra Insights 1 – learning from Mark's big story
5. Extra Insights 2 – learning about Jesus' world
6. Exploring the Encounter Triangle
  - What do we think was learned from encountering Jesus?
  - What do we think Jesus learned from the encounter?
  - What have we learned from watching the encounter?
7. Deciding how that helps us to live now
8. *(optional)* Rounding it off with a song

### *Jesus and the sacrificial widow – Mk 12.41-44*

#### 1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

The group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may or may not include prayer or worship or some catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context.

#### 2. SHARING THE STORY

The conversation is started by hearing or sharing the story that will form its focus – the story told in **Mark 12.41-44**. This might be done in one of the following ways:

- Someone reads **Mark 12.41-44** straight from their Bible
- The group re-constructs the story of **Mark 12.41-44** from various rememberings
- The story of **Mark 12.41-44** is told by someone who has prepared it for telling
- A locally-devised combination of some of the above

**Mark 12.41-44** is presented with a little less detail in Luke's Gospel, but the fullest version of the story is this version in Mark.

#### 3. OUR INITIAL REACTIONS

The group should then consider the question:

- "What is this story about?"

This can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. Let's be clear, there's no 'right' answer to this question – it's simply an assembling of ways in which hearing the story has struck group members and their memories of how they have learned its 'meaning' from past encounters and received teaching.

#### 4. EXTRA INSIGHTS part one – learning from Mark's big story

Share the information about how Mark has used this story and where he's placed it in his big story that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 6** at the end of these notes

#### 5. EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning about Jesus' world

Share the information about the social, political and religious world in which Jesus lived that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 7** at the end of these notes

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – eleven

### *Jesus and the sacrificial widow – Mk 12.41-44*

#### 6. EXPLORING THE ENCOUNTER TRIANGLE

The group takes time to explore the story (in the light of their initial ideas and the Extra Insights that they've shared), standing, in turn, at each corner of the triangle. Although the focus of the story is a poor widow, it is a group of Jesus' followers who are invited to learn from the situation, so they, not her, will be our first triangle corner group.

Standing and looking at the story from the perspective of Jesus' followers, consider:

- **What do we think Jesus' followers learned from Jesus' observation?**
  - *teasing this out ... What assumptions did the Temple and its system expect believers, such as Jesus, his followers and the devout widow, to make? How does Jesus read this starving widow's giving to this Temple system? What conclusions does Jesus seem to be inviting his followers to make?*

Standing and looking at the story from Jesus' perspective, consider:

- **What do we think Jesus learned from watching this starving widow?**
  - *teasing this out ... Why is the giving of this widow so shocking to Jesus? What option(s) does this observation leave for Jesus?*

Standing where we stand, watching the whole encounter, consider:

- **What have we learned from watching these proceedings?**
  - *teasing this out ... What previous understandings of this story did we bring? What have we found in the story this time? What about this story connects with our own stories? What do we take away from watching this encounter together?*

#### 7. HOW DOES THAT HELP US TO LIVE NOW?

Now your group needs to bring it all home. Working as a group, consider two questions:

- **In what ways does this story speak to us today?**

*Be imaginative. Be playful. Be daring. Be incredibly serious. Try ideas. Disagree. Come to a consensus. Work with the story like you're squeezing oranges. What good ideas to help us with living now can the group find from what you have watched?*

- **What are we going to do differently now?**

*Be practical. Be realistic. But be prepared to face the risks and challenges the story raises. Honestly address what the story seems to be saying to you and your situation as individuals, but also as a group, in your church and in your local community.*

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – eleven

### *Jesus and the sacrificial widow – Mk 12.41-44*

#### 8. ROUNDING IT OFF WITH A SONG *(optional)*

#### **Jesus at the Temple Treasury**

*based on Mark 12.41-44*

*tune: Rockingham (When I survey the wondrous Cross)*

1.  
What did You see when, sitting there,  
You watched this widow give her all?  
Who gained? Who lost? Who loved? Who stole?  
Which gift was great; which poor and small?
2.  
What did You feel whilst watching her;  
was thankfulness close-wrapped in shame –  
that here, where God was said to dwell,  
such schemes and systems marred God's Name?
3.  
How did You think relief might come  
when even here injustice reigned?  
What would it take, what sacrifice  
might let God loose to loose our chains?
4.  
And still today, still do You watch  
the deeds we dress as worthiness –  
our power plays in churchly garb,  
do they still cause You deep distress?
5.  
Christ, grant us grace to see with You  
where we ourselves Your cause betray,  
that we no widows might abuse  
but justice do in ev'ry way.

*John M. Campbell*

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – eleven

### *Jesus and the sacrificial widow – Mk 12.41-44*

#### EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

#### THE NEXT STEP

This is one of a number of **encounters in Mark's Gospel** that are being offered through the Vision4Life website. Between them these conversation materials explore a whole range of different encounters that Jesus has in the course of the Gospel story. If your group found this one helpful they may wish to try some of the others.

*This particular set of conversation materials on Mark 12.41-44 is based directly on a Bible study by Gerald West. The original can be found in his article on 'Structural Sin' at*

<http://www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=113>

*If your group are sharing a whole series of these 'encounters' you might prefer to break out of the standard format for this particular study by following Gerald West's original materials.*

*Full acknowledgement for the other ideas and information that helped us construct these materials is given in the **Introduction** to the 'encounters in Mark's Gospel' programme on the Vision4Life website:*

[www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk)

*see the following two pages for the "Extra Insights" materials for this conversation...*

### *Jesus and the sacrificial widow – Mk 12.41-44*

## EXTRA INSIGHTS

### part one – learning from Mark's big story

What can we learn from the stories Mark places both before and after our story and from the way our story works in the whole- Gospel storyline?:

#### The bit before our bit (Mk 12.38-40)

- **"Beware the Scribes!"** – At first sight, the bit before our bit is about something completely different - the behaviour of Scribes. For most of us, the phrase that snags our attention is the bit about 'devouring widows' houses'. If we pull on that snag it all begins to unravel... Might this explain why our widow is so poor? Who are these Scribes? Are they not part of the temple system? Might the widow's devout offering to her God help to keep Scribes and other temple officials in considerable comfort? Where, exactly, does her offering go? Is there a 'system' here that works to exploit the poor – every bit as effective as that run by the large landowners in Galilee?

#### The bit after our bit (Mk 13.1-2)

- **A Prophecy of the Temple's doom** – Again, it first appears that we've moved on to a new and different topic – the wonder of the Temple buildings and their prophesied doom. Yet, there may, once more, be connections worth exploring. The massive re-building of the Temple by Herod is still incomplete. Yes, it is intended to impress and it is hugely impressive, but how is it paid for? What happens to money donated to the Temple 'treasury'? Is Jesus here condemning the whole Temple-building system and, in part, doing so because of its effects on those, like our widow, who give 'all they have to live on' to the Temple Treasury out of their love for God?

#### Our story in the flow of Mark's whole-Gospel story

- Gerald West invites those who study our story to review quickly the whole section from Mark 11.27 to Mark 13.2 – when Jesus is teaching and talking in the Temple. We might also remember Jesus' visit to the Temple the previous day (Mark 11.15-19) when he publicly protested against the commercial abuses associated with the system of offerings and sacrifices by driving traders out. Altogether there is a long section in which Jesus gives teaching after teaching that challenges and condemns the various parties and groups that have a share in the Temple system – Pharisees, Scribes, Herodians, Saducees. For Mark, the final evidence offered of the ungodliness of the whole system is its effect on this poor, devout, and now starving, widow, whom Jesus sits and watches. She stands for all the poor of Galilee and Judea who give what little they have in their devotion to their God, but whose offerings, in practice, fuel the whole Temple system.

### *Jesus and the sacrificial widow – Mk 12.41-44*

## EXTRA INSIGHTS

### part two – learning about Jesus' world

We are used to thinking of the Jerusalem Temple in religious terms, focussed, as it is, on the Holy of Holies. Gerald West<sup>1</sup> invites us to re-read the Temple in social, political and economic terms too.

**The Temple and Social Status** – The Temple laid out the social structure of Judean society in a succession of courtyards of exclusion around the inner Sanctuary – that Sanctuary where only the High Priest could enter and only once a year. Around that Sanctuary was a court where only Priests were admitted; then one where only Jewish men were admitted; then one where Jewish men and women were admitted; then one where Gentiles were admitted; but 'the sick, the maimed and the mutilated, the mentally and physically disabled, and 'unclean' women'<sup>2</sup> were entirely excluded from the temple and its worship. How well did this fit with the sorts of access and inclusion that Jesus displayed earlier in the Gospel?

**The Temple and the Politics of Judea** – The High Priest in Jerusalem was the second most important person in Roman occupied Palestine, second only to the Roman Procurator himself. The Sanhedrin, the Temple-based Council, in a form of tolerated and compliant 'indirect rule', were allowed to act as the ruling council in Jerusalem with a significant say over the lives of the Judean population, always provided they did not work against the policies and political wishes of the Romans. The Temple authorities were Roman clients, trusted to act as political overlords on Rome's behalf. Yet the Roman Procurator would regularly come up from Caesarea to Jerusalem for the most important festivals to make clear who was really in control - so much for theocracy.

**The Temple and the Economic Order** – Not only the Jerusalem economy was dominated by the Temple and its streams of worshippers drawn to its festivals and worship. The Temple was the principal engine of re-distribution of wealth within the Judean, even Palestinian, economy. The Temple Tax and offerings sucked in what little wealth the rural poor may have achieved through labour and surpluses and redistributed it to sustain the wealthy ruling and religious elite, with a hefty chunk siphoned off by the Romans. It is the harsh realities of this system and its cruel effects on this impoverished widow, who graciously hands over the last of her meagre survival monies without question, which Jesus watches so closely and so perceptively in our story.

---

<sup>1</sup> see pages 3-5 of West's on-line article 'Structural Sin – a South African perspective' which can be found at <http://www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=113>

<sup>2</sup> see page 3 of West's article, as in footnote 1.