

That passage that I referred to: the story of the widow's offering that we looked at that picture from earlier on in the service. The passage actually is only four verses and have integrated the words of these four verses into some pictures I found; these pictures are by a guy: he's an Anglican church minister and he's an artist, and I love his pictures 'cause they just capture just a lovely sense of the word of God really. So we're just going to look at these words as they come up on the screen.

So the context is: Jesus and his disciples were in the temple as a crowd gathered around him. So the words that Jesus is saying to his disciples, but actually everybody around him in the temple can hear what he's saying. Jesus and his disciples were in the temple as a crowd gathered around him. Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. And the artist here has interpreted the way they were doing it – perhaps a bit pompous: you know walking forward with a bit of swagger “look how much money I'm giving to God!” Patting each other on the back. “Oooo he's good, isn't he, look how generous he is.” Then Jesus saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins.

In the temple of the time you dropped your gifts: it's like an inverted sort of trumpet, a metal trumpet, so it's wide at the top and went down. And so as you dropped in your gift it was heard how much you were giving. And perhaps all of the rich, you know they, made sure there's plenty of coins in there and sort of dropping it all in, and the noise and like the bass notes (because these would be big coins, solid coins), and as they dropped in everybody would know just how generous you'd been. Then the window comes up: two very small copper coins – I bet they hardly made a noise as she dropped them in, they were so small and so tinny and light. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “this poor widow has put in more than all of the others;...” (more than all the others!) “...They gave out of their wealth but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.” (She putting all that she had to live on.!)

I think you can read the Bible on different levels, and we can say that obviously on a surface level at the surface-level, at the surface level, this is simply a story about whose gift was most acceptable in God's sight and that actually the important thing is not the size of the gift but the attitude in which we give it. If we think we're giving to God and actually we're doing God a favour, God must be so pleased with me 'cause I'm so generous to him! God's so lucky to have me on his side! You come out it with that attitude you are completely misunderstanding what God is looking for.

The widow, she came with the very little that she had but she gave it sacrificially. Actually she couldn't afford to give it; Jesus said, probably looking at her clothing and perhaps even knowing her from having been around this town, around Jerusalem, around the city rather. He might have known something of her circumstances. And so he knew that she was giving sacrificially – she couldn't afford it, but she was giving to God her very last coins that she would have used to survive and to live on.

So that's a surface reading of this passage and I'm sure Jesus meant it that way – the verses are to be read that way. But there are also deeper things that we can also recognise in, and particularly I think it's so often important to look at, the context of the reading that we're looking at. And actually the context of this passage, the rest of the chapter, is entitled “Signs of the end of the

age". And it's all about how this temple has ('cause of course Jesus is stood in the Jewish temple, and it's all about the fact that this temple) may be here now, but it's going to be knocked down – there will be not be one stone upon another in this place. And Jesus said that because the disciples were getting really quite excited, they were looking at the fantastic architecture, they were looking at the extravagant beauty of this Jewish temple. And Jesus was really telling them: don't get drawn in – it may look beautiful, it may be incredible luxury that you're looking at, but it's just man-made. And it's given in the same attitude as those (the rich and the powerful) men putting in their coins into the temple treasury. Has it been built to glorify God? I think Jesus is suggesting: no, it's been built for other reasons, it's been built for other reasons.

So the surface level is about what is most acceptable in giving to God. But as I say, Luke chooses to place it in this chapter about the destruction of this magnificent Jewish temple. Now the temple was built by Herod the Great – he was the Herod that was on the throne when Jesus was born. He's the Herod that the wise men were told not to go back to after they'd seen Jesus because he wants to kill the child; and in fact in his attempt to kill the child we understand he went to the area of Nazareth and killed every child he could find under the age of 4 to try and destroy this child who he was told was to be King of the Jews. That's the King Herod that built this temple. Not a man particularly well known for his devotion to God. His religion was probably looking after himself and making sure he stayed on the throne for as long as possible.

Actually, we think that this temple was built as a bit of a cultural bribe to the Jewish leaders because, actually, King Herod was only half Jewish and he was half Idumean (which is another tribe) and so his family had intermarried with another tribe. And as you probably know the Jewish people were very unsure about, you know, sullyng your Jewish heritage by marrying into another tribe, another grouping, another nation. And so to try and win them round he wanted to show how much of a good Jewish man he was and how he would lift up the Jewish nation and restore them to their greatness of the past, and so he built them this magnificent temple. It was filled with gold inlay and other magnificent stone and other metals, and it was supposed to be such a wonderful thing to look upon – it was such a magnificent thing. It was built not necessarily by actual slaves but it was built by people who treated pretty much as slaves. And the conditions in which they worked and lived were really awful, in the building of this temple supposedly to the glory of God.

It was so beautiful a temple that when it was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 (they weren't stupid the Romans) before they set it alight they stripped it of everything of value and some of it actually we have in stone reliefs in, particularly in Rome: there are pictures there of the Golden Menorah (that's the holder for seven candles and it was made of gold) and there's pictures there of it been carried as booty into Rome as they stripped out everything of value from the Jewish temple.

So, this is the magnificent temple that the disciples are looking at and saying doesn't it look fantastic! Isn't it wonderful to be here? And Jesus is saying don't get drawn in to this temple that is supposedly to God's glory, but actually who does it really glorify?

I think that Jesus is here partly critiquing the status quo of his day, he's partly critiquing the status quo of his day. I think the question that he's putting is "Why is it that the rich can afford luxury living and the ruler of the Jewish people can build such a Temple as this, but the poor can't even make ends meet?" I think that's an underlying message that we get from these words of Jesus here: "How can it be right that the rich live in such luxury and the poor have so little?"