

Homily for The Thirty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year B)(11/11/18)
100 Years since the End of The First World War

Today it is a hundred years since the guns of the First World War fell silent. There is a short video you can see on the internet made by the Imperial War Museum, which uses an original sound graph recording from that day a hundred years ago, to which technicians have added back the sound of guns firing until the moment when the guns stop, and silence descends. It is strangely moving to hear it and to imagine how it must have sounded in reality. It must have been hard to believe after those long years of noise and death and destruction that it was all over. In that moment the killing stopped. But of course even though the killing stopped, the dying carried on, and many of those we remember will have died of their wounds after the guns fell silent. More than that, we now know that the silence was to be a temporary one, and since then other guns in other places have burst into action more often than those First World War survivors would have hoped. But on this day perhaps we should imagine the relief that must have been felt, a hundred years ago today.

A hundred years ago that the guns fell silent, and by chance the Church gives us readings about widows. A hundred years ago there were, sadly, a great many more widows in Europe than there had been four years earlier. Just as the echo and reverberation of a gun firing prolongs the sound long after the gun is discharged, so the echo of that war lasted long after silence fell. 50, 60, 70, 80 years after the last shot was fired the echoes lasted on, and someone, somewhere was remembering someone for whom the guns fell silent too late. Perhaps there may be just one or two who still do. The tragedy, of course, is that this war to end all wars did not, and if the widows of the First World War have now all gone, there are plenty of widows and orphans from other conflicts still. It seems we really will never learn, and the thirst for power that lies behind all wars will never be slaked. Do the widows have a message for us to help us make sense of this, the widows of today's scriptures?

For many of the widows and other dependents, as well as for the wounded, life after that First World War was tough. But in the ancient world it was tougher still. There was no sort of safety net at all for them, and a widow was absolutely and totally dependent on the generosity of family and friends. When we read about widows in the scriptures we know that the reading is about poverty, but more than that it is about dependence. The widows depend on the kindness of others. The widow Elijah meets, and the widow Jesus sees in the Temple, had no way to support themselves.

Elijah has been sent by God to Zarepath in the middle of a great drought. He has specifically been told to search out a widow: he has been told to go to the person least likely to be able to help him. A person who is totally dependent on help from outside is the one who sees the dependence in Elijah's eyes, and so she shares her last meal, or what she thinks is her last meal, with him. I suppose that the logic of the warrior would be to protect that last meal, but the warrior's logic and the widow's logic are not the same, and so she sits down to eat with the Prophet. The warrior who might have turned him away in defence of his own food would have missed a meal with the prophet: he would also have missed the jar of meal that is never spent and the jug of oil that is never emptied. The widow's recognition of another's dependence wins her the prophet's reward.

The widow in the Gospel appears in a rather different circumstance. She appears in contrast to the scribes, who are after attention. For them, the important thing is that they should be the centre of attention. Fine robes and respectful greetings are the order of the day. The widow is different. Christ does not need to point out the rich men to his disciples, they are obvious and ostentatious enough to attract attention. The widow, though, is unobtrusive. There, look: he has to point her out to the disciples, otherwise they will miss her. The scribes seek attention, they want everyone to notice them; the widow wants no-one to see what she is doing, no-one to notice her. Perhaps she thinks that what she gives away is not really hers, because it is only what she has been given anyway.

The widows in today's readings both know that what they have is not really theirs, it is not for hoarding and protecting, it is for giving away: the last loaf, the last pennies. Who are the ones that lead us into wars: the ones who hoard and demand an acknowledgement of their own importance, or the ones who recognise their dependence and share what little they have? It is a complex world, and sometimes fighting is unavoidable. It is so very hard to know when that moment has come, when with great reluctance a nation must take up arms. How can we ever know that this moment has been reached? Perhaps we can never know for sure, can never guarantee that we have got it right. But perhaps the best way to know if the time has come and conflict cannot be avoided is to ask the widows.