

**Liturgy of the Word, Mark 13. 1-8, Twenty Fifth Sunday After Pentecost,
14 November 2021**

Vanity and Grandeur
Beyond the Splendour and Majesty of Jerusalem Lies the Reality of the Cross
Mark 13:1-8

By
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The Collect

Gracious Lord,
your Son came to bring us good news
and power to transform our lives:
grant that when he comes again as judge
we may be ready to meet him with joy,
through Jesus Christ our Lord;
who lives and reigns with you and the

Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen

Main Readings

1 Samuel 1:4-20
1 Samuel 2:1-10 (replaces the Psalm)
Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18), 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

**Liturgy of the Word: Vanity and Grandeur, Beyond the Splendour and Majesty of
Jerusalem Lies the Reality of the Cross**

Jesus is now in Jerusalem in the last stage of his ministry (Mark 11:1-11). When Jesus entered Jerusalem and was publicly proclaimed as Messiah, everyone knew that Jesus was entering a very divisive and conflict-ridden city that could put his life in jeopardy. But even though his life could have been under threat, as Jesus remained in Jerusalem, he took instead a more sober and collecting approach, taking turns to interact with different stakeholders in the city, from ordinary people, civil authorities, religious leaders, guardians of the law, merchandisers, to onlookers. Each group came to Jesus armed with a specific need and concern. As Jesus taught in the temple, gradually the focus in the city moved from the temple as the centre of Jewish religious establishment and sovereignty to Jesus, as the Messiah, hence the new centre of Torah, a wellspring of divine authority and focus, a prophecy fulfilled, '[t]he stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (Mark 12:11).' Indeed, as the pendulum of authority shifted, representative groups of Jewish leadership grew more apprehensive and sought to approach Jesus as he taught in the temple. Each group came to Jesus with a question appropriate to the groups' concerns; and Jesus, in turn, took time to address each as he saw fit. Members from the Sanhedrin group, such as the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes, came with the aim to question the source of Jesus' authority (Mark 11:27-33); while the Pharisees and Herodians came with the view to try to trap Jesus on the issue of giving taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17); and the Sadducees coming with the aim to challenge Jesus on the resurrection life (12:18-27). In their wrestling with the complexities and nuances of the law of Moses, among the groups, the scribes have been Jesus' chief opponents throughout the narrative. Indeed, two Sundays ago, we saw how Jesus wrapped up the temple scene by his interaction with the group. The scribe who identified the love of God and neighbour as the first commandment of the Torah is said by Jesus to be "not far from the kingdom of God (Mark 12:28-34).¹ In the same token, as the sons of Zebedee have made it clear earlier on the way; the disciples, having left everything behind to follow the Messiah, including dropping their nets completely, could not await the opportunity to seize the momentum to bring their petitions before the Messiah as well. Either to receive a share in the

¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy: *The Writings of the New Testament, Third Edition*. SCM Press, London 2010, p. 159

splendour of Jerusalem or to mainly seek to be granted the privilege to be with Jesus in the glory of his kingdom, which the glorious splendour of the city of Jerusalem and the temple seem to anticipate (Mark 10:37).

The widow's offering

Today's gospel is a painful reminder of how amid splendour, opulence, plenty, ease, and greed the agony and the cries of the poor may be completely overlooked and ignored (Mark 12:41-44). Beneath the gospel of Mark is a story of pain, torture, trauma, and suffering. Mark's selection of metaphors to reinforce his apocalyptic stances, such as 'earthquakes' and 'birth-pangs epitomizes this reality (Mark 13:8). Where the disciples see splendour and grandeur, Jesus sees the cross. For Jesus, beyond the splendour of Jerusalem lies the certainty of the cross. Last Sunday, you might have heard how Jesus took turns to visit the temple for worship. Seating opposite the treasury, Jesus was moved with compassion as he attentively observed and noticed how, during the proceedings, many were throwing large sums from their surplus, while the poor widow, out of her poverty had to give her last two coins. Jesus was moved with empathy to the point of calling and telling his disciples how the widow has given more than anyone else, as out of her poverty she has given all her possessions. In doing so, Jesus has set the widow's ultimate offering as a pattern for Christian discipleship. For Jesus, it is not how much we give but how we give. It is not the value and weight of our gift, but how we offer our gift. Generosity is the essence of the Christian faith, the heart that gives carries more weight than the value received. Out of her poverty, in her offering in the treasury, having put in everything she had, everything she had to live on, the widow has displayed the ultimate in the Christian faith. The widow's offering gives us the vocabulary we need to speak about the joys and sorrows of Christian ministry today. Failure to capture and notice the widow's offering is to miss the cross and the essence of Christian discipleship.

Vanity and grandeur

Vanity and grandeur are recurring human problems. Even the disciples, upon leaving the temple, could not stand the urge to glorify the grandeur that the human concept of glory imposes. "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" For a moment, the disciples might have captured Jesus' prophecy on the widow's offering but as they left the temple, could not withstand the sway of the splendour and majesty of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The vanity of grandeur is an enduring problem for humanity. What Mark seeks to convey in his message is to show that the vanity of grandeur afflicting the human spirit is a perennial phenomenon in which even the followers of Christ cannot remain immune, no matter how higher the accent of their faith may soar. We might even say that it is a constant crisis that restlessly troubles the human heart. We cannot seem to bypass that which pulls our gaze, it is hard to withstand that which seems out of reach, what appears to be so much better than what we have, even including who we are:

As he came out of the temple one of his disciples said to him:

"Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then, Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings?" Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down (Mark 13:2)."

When you are in Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Garden of Gethsemane and the city of Jerusalem, gives you the most splendid view of the city, including the temple. As foretold, in the prophecy of Zechariah, it is from the Mount of Olives, the place of God's judgment on Jerusalem, where Jesus enters Jerusalem as a King, and here he returns in the

company of his disciples as he retreats from the temple and begins to predict the fall of Jerusalem. From the Mount of Olives, Jesus unleashes one of the most disturbing apocalyptic prophecies concerning the city of Jerusalem and the temple (Zechariah 14:4). What a moving paradox and hesitation in a splendid and opulent city! One should ask why from the Mount of Olives the grandeur and splendour of Jerusalem and the temple arrest the disciples' imagination and yearning? Mark's apocalyptic stance is clear, the splendour and glory that the Mount of Olives reveals is a prelude to Gethsemane. Where the disciples see accomplishment, opulence, and glory, Jesus sees desolation, destruction, and despair. Where the disciples see triumph, power, and attention, Jesus sees marginalization, sorrow, trauma, and anguish. Where the disciple's gaze is drawn toward the splendour and majesty of Jerusalem, Jesus is drawn towards calvary, abandonment, and the cross.

As we followed the story of widow's offering, in Mark 12:41-45, we heard how Jesus in his usual ministry in Jerusalem took turns to visit the temple for worship. In one of the occasions, as he sat opposite the treasury, attentively observing how, during the proceedings, some were putting their offerings in the treasury pot out of their surpluses, was moved with compassion as a poor widow, out of her poverty, came and put in her last two copper coins worth a penny. In a lamenting spirit, Jesus was moved to call and tell his disciples how the poor widow had given more than anyone else who contributed out of their abundance, as out of her poverty, by giving her last penny, she gave all her possessions, all that which she had to live in. As Karoline Lewis reminds us, this is, in part, what gets overlooked and dismissed when the vanity of grandeur and splendour stands our way and takes us well beyond what the Gospel of Christ calls us to proclaim.² And in doing so, we are in danger of passing over and passing by the cross. At times, in the perennial stream of splendour and grandeur, the largest and biggest stone may stand our way, making it difficult for us to see the cross in the course of our ministry, making it very hard for us to notice and retrieve the toil and anguish of the lost and the neglected in the dark cloud of progress and greed. As it happened to Jesus, our sense of splendour and grandeur should be found in the plight and anguish of the poor. The story of the widow's offering should move us to lament the plight of the poor. It should move us to come to grips with the irony of the 'largest' and 'the biggest', in order to see the cross beyond the world's accent of accomplishment and progress.

At times, ministry may become a very fragile and complex responsibility, and we can easily bypass and overlook the widow's offering in the memory of splendour and grandeur. In the gauges of glory set by society, the widow's offering should assist us to withstand the storms of progress, and open our eyes and ears to see and listen to the plight of the poor who continue to bear the ills of greed in the backyard of splendour and grandeur of our modern societies. For Karoline Lewis, quite often we quickly and easily find ourselves fascinated and overwhelmed by greatness beyond our grasp and prosperity, beyond our perceived capability. And while some of us who are called to preach, serve, and celebrate would like to think, once we have preached, served, and celebrated we have done the extraordinary, the largest ends up being a mission statement, "the biggest" ends up being a vision statement. Once again, as Karoline puts it, maybe this is the occasion for us to name the truth of the underside of the church. To make it clear that even the church is not immune but susceptible to the measures of might and the gauges of greatness set by society. Maybe this is the occasion that we name the truth to ourselves, to remind ourselves of how much we evaluate our own ministry, even our own personhood, by standards that barely resemble the criteria set by the Gospel. The good news is that, for Jesus of Mark, beyond the splendour and majesty of Jerusalem lies the Garden of Gethsemane, lies the reality of Golgotha where the cross of glory is found. *Amen*

² Karoline Lewis is the Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN