

My Brothers and Sisters,

Both the end of the Church year and the beginning of the new Church year focus on Christ's two comings, his coming in history and his final coming in glory. Today's reading from Hebrews focuses on the two comings of Christ: "*Christ, offered once to take away the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.*" The author of Hebrews is speaking a word of hope to us. One of two homilies that I remember from my high school days ended with the homilist saying, "Remember Christ never comes to judge but only to save." Think about that: "Christ never comes to judge but only to save."

Today's reading from Hebrews also affirms the profound truth that Jesus offered his life to God for us, thus joining love for God and love for us in the same act and teaching that all true love is sacrificial: self-revealing, self-giving, self-sacrificing. Both today's reading from I Kings and today's Gospel exemplify sacrificial giving.

The Gospel story of the widow's gift is often used in parish stewardship talks. However, in the context of the verses that preceded it, I think Jesus was using this story to make the point that the measure of her gift and, therefore, the measure of her love was not the amount she gave but the sacrifice she was willing to make. Although the rich gave large sums and the woman only gave two small coins worth a few cents, Jesus said, "*Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.*"

My guess is that much of our giving of time, talent, or treasure, other than to our families and close friends, is not really sacrificial. We give, and sometimes we give generously, but do we sacrifice? I ask myself this question all the time. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus also said, "*Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more*" [12:48].

The story in I Kings occurs during a major drought. When the prophet Elijah asked the widow for a cupful of water and a bit of bread, she had nothing left but a handful of flour and a little oil in her jug. She was about to prepare a last meal for her son and herself. However, because she was willing to share what she had with the prophet, God promised her that she would not run out of flour or oil. Like the widow in the Gospel, she was willing to share all she had to live on. This story reminds us to trust in God and that if we give sacrificially, God will provide.

My brothers and sisters, the forgotten part of today's readings is the first part of the Gospel where Jesus criticizes people who like to appear religious while acting unjustly. Gospel passages like this always remind me of two other Gospel verses. At one point in Luke's Gospel, Jesus asks rhetorically, "*But when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?*" [18:8; NJB]. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus predicts that "*because of the increase of evildoing, the love of many will grow cold*" [24:12]. We all need to think about these two verses. How real is our faith? How deep is our love? Do we live our faith outside the church, or does our faith stop at the door of church?