

The theme for our morning's meditation is, 'God multiplies the gift of the generous giver'. Elijah the prophet had prophesied against Israel saying that there would be no dew or rain for the next few years. The Lord asked him to go to the east of the Jordan and hide in the Kerith ravine. There the Lord fed him bread and meat both in the morning and in the evening through the ravens and his thirst was quenched by the little brook that flowed there. Ravens were considered as unclean birds but God used them to feed his prophet. After a while, the brook dried up and the Lord asked him to go to Zarephath in Sidon, where he had commanded a widow to feed him.

Tyre and Sidon are two coastal cities in what is today's south Lebanon, just north of the border of Israel. In biblical times Zarephath was the domain of Queen Jezebel's father Ethbaal (1 Kings 16: 31). Elijah was sent to an alien land where the people worshipped Baal. And here, one of Baal's subjects was to trust in Yahweh's word through his prophet Elijah and find out that Yahweh will sustain her daily. Even though she had trusted in Baal, it had only left her in the pit of hopelessness and on the verge of death. Secondly, a widow in Elijah's time would mean that she lived in abject poverty. But, Yahweh not only used unclean ravens but also used an unlikely widow to take care of his servant. We know the address of this woman as 'the widow of Zarephath' but we don't even know her name. God's word to Elijah is that he had commanded this gentile woman to take care of his prophet.

Elijah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Zarephath where he meets a widow who was gathering sticks. He initially asks her for a drink, and as she goes to get it he yells out to her saying, 'bring me, please, a piece of bread.' The widow swears on oath saying, 'as the Lord your God lives, I don't have any bread – only a handful of flour in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat and die.' The widow takes the word of the prophet as the word of the Lord and gives all that she had to sustain the prophet. The demand to give of her all was the demand of the covenant that Israel had broken. What Israel could not keep, the widow was ready to do. Elijah reassures her and asks her not to be afraid. Instead, he asks her to go and make a small loaf of bread for him, and then make something for herself and for her son. He then communicates God's word to her, 'the jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.' While there was drought in the land, God was miraculously going to provide for this non-Israelite widow, who in an act of faith in the Lord's word had laid her life on the line. The Lord gave the woman food from above, while he was withholding food from his unfaithful people in the Promised Land.

The challenge is against Baal who was supposed to be the giver of rain, but Elijah shows that Yahweh is indeed in control and only at his command would it rain. For the widow it was a big gamble as Elijah was asking her to give of everything she had and to trust in the word of the Lord. Faith is staking everything on Yahweh's sheer words, and willing to stake it because of the veracity of God. The woman's response was one of faith and generosity. She went and did as Elijah said. She and her household ate for many days and the jar of flour and the jug of oil did not dry up because of her faith and obedience. By an act of faith the woman received the promised blessing. Israel had forsaken the covenant and had followed Baal and Asherah in

search of prosperity. Now in the midst of a kingdom which does not know Yahweh, a widow realizes that trustful obedience to the word of God is the way that leads to life.

What is our attitude when we are called to give? Do we feel burdened that we have to give or do we give out of gratitude for what God has done for us, in and through Christ on the cross? When we look at the cross there is no gift that is too great to give in return for that great sacrifice. The widow of Zarephath and the little boy who gave his lunch in the Gospel narrative, both had very little to offer, but God took that and multiplied it. May we also give freely from the riches that God has given us. May the cross be the motivating factor for our giving.

Paul Swarup
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