

# Two widows, true to type

By [A. Katherine Grieb](#)

November 2, 2009

For most of canonical history, Mark's Gospel has been considered an ugly duckling and its author a clumsy yokel. It can hardly be a coincidence that this Gospel was recognized as a swan and its author newly discovered as a literary genius after the development of sophisticated cinematic technique prepared us to read it better. Only then could scholars recognize ancient textual equivalents to contemporary filmmaking strategies.

Preachers of this Gospel would do well to imagine themselves directing it: what is the equivalent in Mark's text of the camera's unswerving focus on the glass of milk being carried up the stairs in Hitchcock's [Suspicion](#)?

In today's Gospel passage, the camera focuses first on Jesus, who is warning his disciples about the scribes "who devour widows' houses" and "say long prayers" as they do it. As we are mentally digesting this warning, our view is enlarged to a full panorama of the temple court and its treasury. The scene is one of bustling activity: people moving back and forth, many rich people putting large amounts of money into the temple treasury.

The camera pulls back to focus on Jesus as he *sits* (the traditional posture for teaching) *opposite* (one of Mark's loaded prepositions) the temple treasury. Jesus is opposed to the temple authorities, especially the scribes whose injustice to widows he has just exposed.

As if on cue, a widow appears in the midst of the crowd. We would not have noticed her in the commotion, except that Jesus points verbally at her simple gesture. The

camera zooms in for a close-up shot: she puts in only two small copper coins—a penny. Why does Jesus single her out for attention?

As we

wonder, along with the disciples, the camera catches her disappearing into the crowd again: we saw her only for a few seconds. Now the camera closes in on Jesus' face as he tells us that "all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." The camera pulls back and the screen fades to black as Jesus' words sink in.

The Greek

word behind "all she had to live on" is ambiguous. It can mean "her whole living," as in the story of the widow of Zarephath who fed Elijah, the man of God, from the little she and her son had left to live on. She trusted in God's faithfulness and in the word of the Lord spoken by the prophet. The same word—"bios," from which we get "biology"—can also mean "life": this widow, at the mercy of unjust scribes in the temple, is nevertheless offering to God, through the temple, "her whole life."

Some

recent commentaries fault the widow for colluding with unjust and exploitative economic structures and fault Mark for having Jesus endorse her behavior. In their eagerness to provide a political reading, they may be missing a theological one: the widow is a type of Jesus Christ who similarly chooses to give "his whole life" in the face of those unjust structures that destroy it.

For preachers so inclined, all

four lessons read in concert invite a typological reading of the death, resurrection and second coming of Jesus Christ. The widow of Zarephath approaches the death of her son and herself by trusting God, who proves faithful. Ahab and Jezebel, who crush the poor (e.g., Naboth), reap drought as promised, but God "executes justice for the oppressed," "gives food to the hungry" and "upholds the orphan and widow" (Psalm 146). God's word, like the jar of meal and the jug of oil, does not fail. These two lessons point ahead to the faithful death of Jesus and God's faithfulness in raising him from the dead.

## Mark and Hebrews

point backwards to the cross: Mark's widow is a parable of Jesus' own death; Hebrews complements that local human story by describing the cosmic significance of the atonement. Hebrews also points ahead: Christ will appear a second time to save those who are eagerly awaiting him. We are challenged to trust God's faithfulness as much as these two widows, the psalmist, Mark, Hebrews and our Savior did. Will we let ourselves be "typecast" in Mark's movie?