

HEARERS OF THE WORD

1 Kings 17:10-16; Psalm 146 (145); Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins

Mark 12:38 As Jesus taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! 40 They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money (*chalkon*) into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins (*lepta*), which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For 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.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This passage portrays Jesus in prophetic mode in both sections. The first section is a teaching, which brings to a close the difficult disputes in Mark 12. The second story is a contrasting illustration of the same teaching. Formally, the stories are linked by the mention of the widow. The link however is not simply verbal because, while the *teaching* deplores external show and hypocrisy, the *story* extols genuine sincerity of heart. Earlier in this Gospel, Jesus had contrasted a narrow, legalistic practice (Mark 7:2-7) with the true moral intent of the divine Law (Mark 7:8-13).

KIND OF WRITING

The first story is a straight teaching. In prophetic manner, Jesus names the temptation of all who are “professionally” religious: self-importance, greed, hypocrisy. The second story is a *chreia*, a story with a direct observable point. The

contrast is not between material giving and spiritual giving: both the widow and the very rich give materially—and the Temple needed support. The contrast lies between the attitude (self-glory v. gift) and the cost of the donation (relatively little v. “all she had to live on”).

On the amounts mentioned (lit. a *chalkon*, two *lepta* and a *quadrans*): Sizeable transactions were made in the denomination of the *talent* (Matt. 18:24; 25:14-28) or the *mina* (Luke 19:13-25). The debtor of Jesus’ parable owed alternatively 10 thousand talents (Matt. 18:24) or 500 denarii (Luke 7:41). The smaller denominations, the *chalkos*, *lepton*, *assarion*, and *quadrans*, were used in more daily affairs, for which a purse would be carried (Luke 22:36). Monetary exchange was required to accommodate the variety of coinage, not in the least for cultic and sacerdotal purposes (Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15-18; John 2:14). Luke judges the Pharisees to be “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14). The Euro one cent coin is called a lepton in modern Greek—an illustration of the value intended.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The Temple was a hugely important part of Israelite religion and the support of the Temple was a religious duty. The Temple reconstruction started under Herod the Great and continued all through Jesus’ ministry. It was almost completed only very shortly before its complete destruction by the Romans in AD 70.

Warnings against hypocritical religious practice are found also in the Old Testament:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! (Isa 10:1-2)

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mer-

Thought for the day

Money can easily distort our attitudes and values. It *is* tempting to react more warmly to those who give more generously—we all do it. It *is* easy to overlook the motive behind giving and focus, not on the giver, but on the gift. We do have the expression that it’s the thought that counts. Usually, though, such proverbial wisdom is employed to help me/us be consoled when some expectation was *not* realised. Thus, this apparently consolatory thought acknowledges the tendency to the opposite, the attraction to the gift as such!! The Lord, however, reads our hearts.

Prayer

Lift us up, O Lord, that we may always value what really matters, the heart and not the appearances, the giver and not the gift. When we give, help us remember that you love the cheerful giver, giving from the heart.

cy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. (Zech 7:9-10)

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. (Mal 3:5)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

“Should we pay them, or should we not?” But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.” (Mark 12:15)

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Pet 2:1-3)

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (Jas 3:17)

Cf. Mt 23:1-36 or Lk 11:37-52 (given here):

While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.

“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honour in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realising it.”

One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.” And he said, “Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them. Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation. Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.” (Luke 11:37–52)

ST PAUL

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluc-

tantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness (2 Cor 9:6–11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 38 Scribes were the scholars who studied and interpreted the Law. The way the Greek is written, it can be “the scribes who do this” rather than all the scribes. The previous story involved a sincere scribe, even if an exceptional one in Mark’s overall vision.

Verse 39 Social advancement is often a “benefit” of higher roles in any religion and, of course, hard to resist. The long robes are most likely festal robes which scribes put on every day to show their piety. There may be a contrast between the Christians of Mark’s day and their contemporary scribes: the Christians did not meet in synagogues nor on the Sabbath.

Verse 40 This is a very harsh condemnation, given that it judges the piety to be false and, in a way, empty. The expression “for appearance sake” (*prophasei*) can be positive (the real reason) or negative (falsely alleged motive, pretext, ostensible reason, excuse). In our story it is clearly negative. But which aspect does it govern? It could mean that they cover up their avarice by piety. It could also mean that they facilitate their avarice by piety. It could also mean that their prayer is entirely insincere. In the context here, it means that the piety is done in order to take advantage of vulnerable widows.

Widows

As is well known, widows at the time had no inheritance rights and were dependent upon family or community welfare programmes. The care of widows is regularly insisted upon in the Hebrew Bible and the prophets fiercely condemn the neglect of widows. In that context, this story constitutes a severe judgment, but fully in line with the prophetic tradition. Cf. Lk 11:37-52 and Mal 3:5, both above.

Verse 41 The temple treasury appears rarely in the NT. The widow who gave all she had (Mark 12:41-44 par.) put her

money into the *gazophylakion*, meaning “contribution box or receptacle,” here apparently in or near the Court of the Women (cf. John 8:20). According to the Mishnah, there were 13 such trumpet-shaped receptacles, seven for various required offerings and six for freewill offerings. The administration of the treasury by this time had passed to the chief priest (Matt. 27:6), a fact confirmed by Josephus (Ant. 11.5.2). The fact that we know the donations were large tells us of the ostentation.

Verse 42 In a patriarchal society, a widow is a defenceless female, being without a male to protect and support her.

Verse 43 Apparently not, because she puts in so little. But, at another level, she puts in much, much more.

Verse 44 So, the principle is not the amount but the attitude of heart. “All she had to live on” sounds precarious or even foolish. Literally in Greek, it says “all her life/living” (*bios*).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The scribes are presented as ostentatious and devious, acting more out of self-interest than the love of God or people. There can be an element of self-interest in each of us. Perhaps there have been times when you have been disturbed by glimpsing in yourself ‘other motives’ in your doing good. Recall when you were awakened to this fact. Where was the good news for you in these experiences?

2. In material terms what the widow had to offer was very little. Recall when you felt yourself called to give and gave even though you apparently had very little. Perhaps you have had the experience of finding that what you thought was little and insignificant meant a great deal to another person. Recall some of those moments.

3. The widow ‘gave everything she had, all she had to live on’. In doing so she placed herself in a very vulnerable position, trusting that things would work out. Have you ever found that what seemed a generous but reckless giving of yourself proved life-giving for yourself and others?

PRAYER

God, our provider you are the orphan’s hope and the widow’s bread. Strengthen our faith, that with simplicity of heart we may come to trust in you alone and hold back nothing in serving you. Amen.

Christ has appeared once for all at the consummation of the ages to put away sin by his sacrifice

Heb 9:23 *So it was necessary for the sketches of the things in heaven to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves required better sacrifices than these.* 24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands—the representation of the true sanctuary—but into heaven itself, and he appears now in God’s presence for us. 25 And he did not enter to offer himself again and again, (the way the high priest enters the sanctuary year after year with blood that is not his own, 26 for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world).

But now he has appeared once for all at the consummation of the ages to put away sin by his sacrifice.

27 And just as people are appointed to die once, and then to face judgment, 28 so also, after Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many, to those who eagerly await him he will appear a second time, not to bear sin but to bring salvation. (NET version)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

It is always good to reflect on what “happened” for us in great events of salvation. Hebrews sets about this in an usual way, contrasting two forms of priestly worship, the earthly and the heavenly.

KIND OF WRITING

These verses bring us into the central teaching of Hebrews about the death of Jesus. They require careful reading because, even in Greek, the relationship between the various parts is not entirely clear. In particular, the writer makes use of *typology*. Typology was an early form of Jewish (and Christian) interpretation in which events and figures are understood to be a foreshadowing (lit. a type) of the reality to come. The writer inhabits a philosophical world not unlike that of Philo of Alexandria, ultimately inspired by Plato’s doctrine of the ideal forms. Thus, the Temple in Jerusalem and the Tent of Exodus, material realities, themselves point to a higher, better reality, in heaven itself.

The literary context is even more important than usual. The lead-up of chapter

9 is essential reading. Our text (running from v. 23) finds its immediate setting in 9:23-10:18, where the writer treats the new and complete sacrifice of Christ.

Throughout, the writer has in mind the promise of a new covenant from Jeremiah 31 (see below). Finally, the grammar in these few verses is tricky, with careful positioning of subordinate clauses and subtle use of repeated words, with somewhat shifting meanings.

In sum, it look as if we should regard vv. 25b-26a as a kind of parenthesis, reminding us of earlier contrasts (7:11-25; 8:1-7; 9:1-10, cf. v. 12). The main meaning of Christ’s act is to be found in vv. 24b and 26b. Although these are in parallel, v. 24b is the more significant. The purpose clause of 26b tells us *why* Christ appeared.

To make line of thought clear, v. 23 is added as a kind of heading and brackets have been placed around vv. 25b-26a.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Although the text refers explicitly to the Tent, that is the mobile shrine of the Pentateuch traditions, the writing of Hebrews was most likely triggered by the destruction of Herod’s Temple in Jerusalem under the Romans.

RELATED PASSAGES

New Covenant

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Suffering Servant

Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 23 That is, inferior rites are appropriate for inferior sanctuaries, which are merely types of what is to come.

Verse 24 “Made by human hands” does not mean idolatrous but simply inferior. Jesus entered the very presence of God because of his interior disposition of faithfulness (Heb 2:3). Because he has entered into God’s presence, he is able to continue to intercede for us.

Verses 25-26a In the writer’s neoplatonic world view, what requires repetition is of necessity imperfect. Furthermore the levitical priesthood used animal blood (Heb 10:4), the irrational to purify the rational.

Verse 26b “Once for all” means perfect, in contrast with what is repeated. “His sacrifice” could be better rendered the “sacrifice of himself.” This is a communion sacrifice, as indicated frequently in Hebrews, not propitiation (Hebrews has no doctrine of original sin and the offence of Adam to God etc.).

Verses 27-28 Humans die only once, and so Jesus also died only once *and for all*. In the context of the Suffering Servant, “many” is in contrast with the *few* and not with *all*. His future coming is not a repetition because the function is entirely different, to bring salvation (Heb 1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 6:9; 9:28; 11:7).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In my own life of prayer, how do I see Jesus as the bridge, the mediator between God and me/us?

2. Sin—a difficult term for us, perhaps—has not gone away, of course. In my own vision of faith, how do I experience Jesus’ death and resurrection as a event of forgiveness?

PRAYER

Compassionate and forgiving God, we stand before the mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We know and we believe that he can help us because he is like us. In him, we see you, our prodigal Father, offering us freedom from death and forgiveness of sins. Amen.

God said, I have commanded a widow there to feed you

1Kings 17:1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” 2 The word of the Lord came to him, saying, 3 “Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4 You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” 5 So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. 7 But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

1Kings 17:8 Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 9 “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” 10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” 11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” 12 But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” 13 Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have to said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” 15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Elijah is *the* prophet before the writing prophets which have come down to us. There are many legendary stories about

him and today’s reading is an example. Clearly chosen to anticipate the concern with widows in the Gospel, the reading may nevertheless perplex the contemporary reader—why are we reading this and what does it mean?

KIND OF WRITING

Our story comes 1 Kings 17-19, designed to establish the exclusive authority of Elijah. The story is in two parts. The first shows the fulfilment of the prophecy of drought, to the detriment of the prophet himself. The second part continues the theme of God’s miraculous support his prophet. The literary form is that of the test. The widow has virtually nothing, but she trusts against reason and so passes the test.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The Elijah (1 Kgs 17-19, 2 Kgs 1:2-17) and the Elisha cycles (2 Kgs 2, 3:4-27; 4:1-8:15; 13:14-21) seem to be post-Deuteronomistic additions, incorporated later into the history. The Deuteronomist regards prophets simply as bearers of the word, whereas these two figures are wonder-working “men of God.” Elijah seems to have been a real historical figure, but the stories handed down and inserted here are of doubtful historical accuracy. Instead, they serve another purpose: to support the theological analysis of the collapse of the Omride dynasty.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Cf. Moses a prophet in Deut 11:13-17; 18:15-16.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Thus the prophet is introduced. Two things are implied. (1) The punishment of Ahab. (2) The power of YHWH: he controls the elements, not Baal (the storm god, responsible for rain). This prepares for the big text in ch. 18, when the drought is resolved: In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain. (1 Kings 18:45)

Verse 2 The classic introduction is used.

Verses 3-6 Elijah himself is a victim, but God will care for him miraculously. Thus he has food and water. No one knows where this Cherith is.

Verse 7 A wadi is a riverbed, containing water only in the rainy season. Unsurprisingly, it dries up.

Verses 8 Again, a classic instruction.

Verse 9 Zarephath was very near Sidon, the home place of Jezebel, pro-motor of Baal.

Verse 10 The scene is fully described. Without support, widows often became destitute scavengers. The initial request for water presents no problem.

Verses 11-12 The second request is problematic because the widow has almost nothing. On the contrary, she is planning a final, miserable meal for herself and her child before they too succumb to famine.

Verse 13 Against a reasonable assessment, Elijah insists. This is the test moment.

Verse 14 The word of the Lord is expressed suddenly in poetry, used for special effect here. The (old) Jerusalem Bible, used in the lectionary, captures well the folkloric and spell-like tone of the prophecy:

*“Jar of meal shall not be spent,
jug of oil shall not be emptied,
before the day when the Lord sends
rain on the face of the earth.”*

Verse 15 Without any more words, the widow passes the test and gains an extraordinary reward.

Verse 16 Thus the word of the Lord is confirmed in its strength.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. A reflection could begin by going back to some moment in your own life, when there seemed no way forward and suddenly you were unexpectedly supported and nourished.

2. The widow’s act of trust is extraordinary, an example of hoping against hope (Rom 4:18). When have you been challenged to trust in God, in spite of all reasonable evidence to the contrary? Where you able to find unexpected abundance like the widow?

PRAYER

Gracious God, you keep faith forever, even at the times when we cannot perceive it. Show yourself once more a father and a mother and let us know your care for all, especially the defenceless and the needy. Amen.

THE LITURGY

1 Kings 17:10-16; Psalm 146 (145); Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

READINGS 1 AND 3

The story of the widow who gave all she had to the prophet Elijah—literally all she had to live on—sets up the Gospel story.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 146 (145) makes an ideal response, based on God’s faithfulness.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

1 Kings 17:1-16

Elijah was a real historical figure, who lived in the ninth century BC and was significant in his day. As often happens, legendary stories are used to capture the power and importance of the heroes of old. What do you think the writer is trying to get across?

Second Reading

Hebrews 9:24-28

What is the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross? The writer of Hebrews contrasts the repeated sacrifices of the Temple with the once-and-for-all offering of Jesus’ faithfulness.

Gospel

Mark 12:38-44

In this culture, to be a widow meant to be without support and protection, very poor and vulnerable. And yet, this is precisely the figure Jesus picks out for special praise and commendation.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 8 November

Wisdom 1:1-7

The book of Wisdom is a great book, gathering in the biblical tradition for a younger generation, probably in Alexandria in Egypt. All beginnings are important for setting the tone and the opening invitation of this book does exactly that.

Luke 17:1-6

Our Gospel is short—really three discrete teachings. Each one will speak to

us today, especially perhaps the very first one.

Tuesday 9 November

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12

Ezekiel offered the suffering people an extraordinary vision of life and healing flowing from God’s presence. The picture of abundant nature will surely strike a chord in our time: *‘Fish will be very plentiful, for wherever the water goes it brings health, and life teems wherever the river flows. Along the river, on either bank, will grow every kind of fruit tree with leaves that never wither and fruit that never fails; they will bear new fruit every month, because this water comes from the sanctuary. And their fruit will be good to eat and the leaves medicinal.’*

1 Cor 3:9-11, 16-17

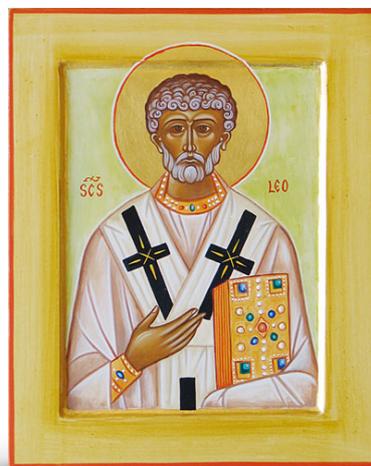
Who are we really before God? No less than a temple of the Holy Spirit, built on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

John 2:13-22

The Temple action was radical—not an attack on abuse but on the functioning of the Temple as such.

Wednesday 10 November

St Leo the Great, bishop of Rome, doctor



Wisdom 6:1-11

What has advice to a king to do with us? Each of us must rule our own life with the same wisdom!

Luke 17:11-19

Three little expressions can help in all

contexts: “May I?”, “I’m sorry” and “Thank you.” Thanksgiving—eucharist—is at the heart of our worship and our relationship with God.

Thursday 11 November

St Martin of Tours

Wisdom 7:22-8:1

The description of Wisdom reaches a climax in these poetic lines. It starts with an accumulation of attributes (21 = 7x3, indicating perfection); in the centre are five resonant words: breath, emanation, reflection, mirror and image. God is ever within (immanent) and ever beyond (transcendent).

Luke 17:20-25

According to this Gospel, the kingdom of God *is among us*. Where have I seen signs of it? Have I myself been part of its presence? With whom am I sharing this great reality?

Friday 12 November

St Josaphat, bishop and martyr

Wisdom 13:1-9

In condemning those who do not know God, the writer balances sympathy and blame — not so easy!

Luke 17:26-37

The passage has a somewhat threatening presentation—we know neither the day nor the hour. The invitation is not to sleepwalk though life but to be fully alive now in this present moment.

Saturday 13 November

Wisdom 18:14-16, 19:6-9

The writer, using his own poetic metaphors, reflects on the Exodus. The Word descending is very evocative and looks forward to John 1:1-18.

Luke 18:1-8

The shabby motives of the unjust judge don’t really matter, as long as the widow gets what she wants! Luke seems to be saying, if even miserable unjust judges finally deliver, all the more so our compassionate, loving God. If God seems to delay it is really so that we may ask from more deeply within.