

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Poor Widow?

I've known an awful lot of people who have experienced the death of the person they married. I haven't just tried to imagine the impact of widowhood, I've also shared it in special ways. In the helpless circumstances of someone's last hours in a hospital or at home, families make special room for the chaplain, or the parish priest: there is a special sense of listening to the words of the faith: the solemn words of commendation, the firm hope of the prayers of anointing, the tremendous consolation of Viaticum, the last receiving of communion, whose name means *Food for Travellers*. The priest's visit afterwards can be a calm, reflective time in a welter of anxiety and fear, or that merciful numbness that usually protects us when we are devastated. People are willing to talk at such times, and what they say is not to be easily weighed; surely it isn't to be *predicted* as, with the best will in the world, we can't really prepare for such a time at all. It's never the way we imagined.

Biblical Widowhood

The first thing that strikes me about widowhood in the Scriptures is its utter helplessness. Let's not think of the Jewish world's kindly community coming to the aid of those who have lost their security. They didn't have an independent existence, but depended on their fathers, and subsequently their husbands. Deprived of both, they became an item in the inheritance of their sons, and if there were no son, they were derelict. They couldn't inherit property or wealth, and if they went into debt their creditors could bring them to starvation if they had no man to care for them. Having no advocacy put them at the mercy of dishonest judges; although there were mumbling general laws against their oppression, it is clear from the many texts which mention them that widows *were* regularly disregarded and abused. The New Testament describes a welcome change of attitude: although in the Gospels widows remain objects of pity, in epistles they are well cared-for, valued for their contribution to the community.

Widowhood now

Most widows will experience great practical hardship even now; few marriages ensure that both partners are equally competent in every field. Excuse my sexual stereotyping when I say that it seems poignant for a woman cruelly and

suddenly to be pitchforked into cold bus-shelters in her bereavement because she never learned to drive: other women find they have never paid the bills. On the other hand there are men who look doubtfully at the washing-machine and don't know how to cook a meal. Emotionally widowhood is what it always was. It is like half of you dying. I've watched so many people trying to face up to that, and as many different ways of responding. There are many factors of difference: the age at which it happens is important, and so is the way in which death comes: suddenly, throwing us into shock, or after long illness, causing those who nurse to accompany the sufferer almost to the gates of death. The storm of memories, some comforting, some sharply painful, has to be weathered, and that transition from the shared story which seemed always under construction, to a state where the last page of a life has been written: the thought that *that is now completed, finished for good or ill*. We should not forget the deep mystery of forgiveness – bereavement can be a time of anger, and of unique opportunities for grace. Which brings us to the widow in today's Gospel, who, from her own unique, lonely place and time, finds her selfless gift of two halfpence lifted high by the Son of God, and carried into history. It is because she is on the frontier of the human mystery, and because she can hold all she has left in one hand, that she can give heroically. Despite all her sufferings, no-one could ask anything greater. *Fr Philip*