

GOD IS THE WIDOW'S HUSBAND!

Today's Text: Isaiah Chap. 54

Extracts:

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; neither be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and will not remember the reproach of your widowhood anymore. For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is His name; ... He is called the God of the whole earth [Is. 54: 4]

Sumatee Enal (37) and Ravi Maharaj (60) had been married for 17 years but without a child.¹ Ravi was a wealthy specialist physician and businessman who owned properties in San Fernando in the southern part of Trinidad, including a three-storey mall. His assets were estimated to be worth TT\$30 million (approximately US\$5 million). On Wednesday, 11 January 2006, unknown assailants murdered Dr. Maharaj. Almost soon after, his relatives seized the mall, carted away goods and cash and decided to take charge of the funeral arrangements according to Hindu rites. On finding herself helpless against her murdered husband's relatives, Enal went to court, which ruled that she was the legal executrix of the late doctor's estate. The funeral scheduled by his relatives for Saturday, 21 January 2006, had had to be postponed so as to resolve the family feud.

Does that story sound familiar? A relatively young woman has just lost her husband in unexpected circumstances. She is in deep shock, confused and wondering what to do. She may be weeping uncontrollably and badly in need of comfort and support from family, friends and well-wishers. But what does she get? She finds herself forsaken and in shame. Who will take care of her now, from now on? In most societies all over the world, widowed men (called widowers) are more able to cope than widows who do not enjoy equal social or legal protection. So, who will fill the void?

In today's Bible text, God has assured the widow that He is her husband. Therefore, she should fear not. Let us find out how He does it.

¹ Story based on the following sources: "Court stops murdered doctor's cremation," *Newsday*, Section A, p. 5, Sunday, January 15, 2006; and "Enal gets her cremation wish," *Newsday*, Section A, p. 3, Thursday, January 19, 2006

1. The average widow is unpaired and impaired!

A widow is a wife who has outlived her husband. All through history, the normal expectation is that there are more widows than widowers. One plausible explanation for this is that most men are older than their wives. Although people do not die by age, it is expected that, barring accidents, older husbands will die before their younger wives. There is also the role of wars where the majority of soldiers are men and husbands, a good number of whom die in battle. In those parts of the world ravaged by HIV/AIDS, more men than women have died, thus swelling the army of widows and the fatherless.

According to Martha Alter Chen² who has done extensive research on widowhood, the proportion of widows among all adults (15 years or older) is highest in the developed countries where greater longevity and low fertility rates increase the ratio of old to young people. Among women 60 and older, widowhood is significant everywhere, from 40% in developed countries and Latin America to 50% in Africa and Asia. In general, widowhood is experienced *primarily* by elderly women in developed countries and by younger women (many of whom are still rearing young children) in developing countries.

Death has *unpaired* the widow from her husband but *impaired* her with numerous challenges, some of which are as follows:

a) *Emotional void*

Chen cites a widow who said, “When I was married, I was Mrs. Donnell. I was somebody. Now that my husband is dead, I am nobody.” That is a weighty statement. She may have successful children and guaranteed economic security. None of those can substitute for her husband. She misses her lover, companion and best friend. The chores that he used to perform, that she used to take for granted, have now fallen on her and she is not adequately prepared.

What of the shame and reproach [Is. 54: 4] that she perceives soon after his death? In traditional societies, when a husband dies, no matter at what age and in what manner, his relatives look at his wife as the first suspect. If she cries bitterly, they may think that she has something to hide, that she is trying to divert attention from her role in his death! If she does not weep, they say that she is celebrating because she has been set free to go and marry her lover! Either way, the widow finds herself in an emotional void.

Can you imagine what Bathsheba passed through before she married king David? Certainly, David’s domestic servants and the close relatives of

² Martha Alter Chen, “Why Widowhood Matters,” www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/pim/feature/2WIDOWS.TXT

Uriah, her husband, knew that she was having an adulterous affair with the king while her husband was in the war front. In due course, she became pregnant for David and not her husband. Then, David got her husband killed. The Bible records, “When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband. And when her mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife” [2 Sam. 11: 26, 27]. If you were Uriah’s relatives, how would you see the whole thing? Would you not see her mourning as shedding crocodile tears?

b) *Economic hardship*

The breadwinner is dead and his wife may not have worked before now. Or, husband and wife may have been running the family business together before his death and each of them had assigned roles. Now, the widow will either do everything or do something about the business. In general, there is no one to take care of her economic needs and hardship can set in. See, for example, how in the early church the Hellenists (Grecians) complained against the Hebrews “because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution” [Acts 6: 1].

Look at the situation that Naomi faced when her husband and two sons died in a foreign land [Ruth 1: 1-5]. She and her husband had left Bethlehem during a period of famine to live in the country of Moab. Everything seemed to be looking up when they had settled down and her two sons had married local wives. Then, ten years later, her husband and sons died, leaving Naomi with hunger, hardship and two daughters-in-law that she could not take care of. In desperation, she decided to return to Bethlehem and asked the other two women to return to their people [vv. 11, 12].

We do hear of disputes between the widow and her husband’s relatives over his estate. A common example that I have seen so often is the case of a worker who took employment while he was single. In his pension records, he had declared his parents or siblings as next of kin. Over time, he got married and raised children without updating his records. Some twenty years later, he dies and his records are opened only to discover that the declared next of kin is not his widow or children but his relatives! What can the courts do in such circumstances?

c) *Social hurdles*

We seem to forget that the widow may have had an active sex life with her late husband. All of a sudden, she finds herself without a man that she could sleep with without any conscience. If she remarries, her children may feel let down. If she takes a lover, society and her church will look

down on her. These are standards that they would not have stringently applied to a widower!

See what happened to Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law and wife of his firstborn, Er [Gen. 38: 1-26]. When Er died childless, his younger brother, Onan, by Jewish tradition, was required to raise children by Tamar. He refused and did so in a way that offended God (by emitting on the ground instead of into her body). Onan also died, leaving Judah with his youngest son, Shelah, who was not yet a man. So, Judah turned to his daughter-in-law and said to her, "Remain a widow in your father's house till my son Shelah is grown." But when Shelah came of age, Tamar was not given to him as promised. At the same time, Judah himself had become a widower. In his escapades to satisfy his sexual urges, Judah unknowingly slept with his daughter-in-law who had disguised herself as a prostitute! She became pregnant and the same Judah sought to get her burnt for prostitution. Tamar was smarter than that. She had taken Judah's signet, cord and staff in pledge as payment for services rendered! When she presented proof of fatherhood for her pregnancy, Judah said, "She has been more righteous than I because I did not give her Shelah my son."

From the forgoing, we see that it is not easy to live as a widow in a world ruled by men. God knows this and that is why He has offered Himself as the widow's husband.

2. God is the widow's husband!

God's message in Isaiah Chapter 54 is addressed to the nation of Israel as the restored "wife" of the Lord. However, the principles and issues discussed therein are very applicable to the ordinary widow, every wife who has outlived her husband. As He said to Israel, God is also saying to every widow [Is. 54: 4,5]:

I will not remember the reproach of your widowhood anymore; for your Maker is your husband...He is called the God of the whole earth.

We have seen, in the earlier section above, examples of the reproach facing an average widow [emotional void, economic hardship and social hurdles]. God has assured the widow, "do not fear for you will not be ashamed; neither be disgraced; for you will not be put to shame; for you will forget the shame of your youth" [v. 4]. Then, He adds an important condition, "*in righteousness you shall be established*" [v. 14]. In other words, *it is only the widow who has faith in and trusts God that He will accept and regard as His wife*. Let us see how God has fulfilled His promises to the widows of old:

- a) *Provision for her economic needs*

No matter how safe human inheritance may look, it cannot last for a lifetime. If there is no dispute in the family over it, natural or man-made disasters, such as fire or hurricane, poor investment or theft, can erode, if not wipe out, man-made economic safety nets. That is where God comes in to insure the widow against any adverse circumstances.

Take the case of the widow of a prophet whose two sons were to be seized as slaves by a creditor for her late husband's outstanding debt. She appealed to the prophet Elisha for help by reminding him, "you know that your servant [i.e., her late husband] feared the Lord" [2 Kgs 4: 1]. The prophet asked what she had in her house. She replied that she had nothing except a jar of oil. The prophet told her, "Go, borrow vessels from *everywhere*, from all your neighbours- *empty vessels*; do not gather just a few." After obtaining the vessels, she was told to shut the door behind her and her sons, and pour oil into all the vessels. She did so until she had no more vessels and the oil ceased. She told the prophet what had happened and Elisha said to her, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debt; and you and your sons *live on the rest*" [vv. 2-7]! Would such a widow still regret losing her debtor-husband?

God is so meticulous about His duty to the widows and the fatherless that He enjoined Moses to *command* the people of Israel that part of their tithes be reserved for them "that they may eat within your gates and be filled" [Deut. 26: 12, 13].

b) *Provision for her social and love needs*

We cannot take for granted the social and love needs of the widow. She needs companionship and she desires to have it in a morally acceptable way. In Paul's Spirit-led instruction to Timothy, he said, "Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives" [1 Tim. 5: 5]. He went on to say that widows over sixty years of age and with a good track record could so be engaged while younger widows should be encouraged to "marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully" [vv. 9, 10, 14].

This principle has been well documented in the Scriptures. For example, Naomi could not raise children again because she was past the age but she continued to give her life to God. Through her dedicated and faithful daughter-in-law, herself also a widow, Naomi was given a new family when Boaz married Ruth. They produced a son called Obed, the grandfather of David [Ruth 4: 13-23], of whom our Lord, Jesus Christ is a direct descendant! Does that not make Naomi the widow God's "wife"?

Anna the prophetess took a different route. She had been married for seven years before her husband died. Instead of remarrying, she dedicated her life to God. Even at age 84, she “did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.” Fortuitously, God granted her the privilege to see baby Jesus when He was presented to God in the temple in Jerusalem [Lk 2: 36-38]. What a joy for a widow!

3. Conclusion: Mary as a role model

Sooner or later, every married believer becomes widowed. How you take life after that is crucial to your calling and salvation. In today’s lesson, God has assured us that it is in righteousness that we shall be established. We know that righteousness in the sight of God is by faith, not by self-effort. Therefore, if you trust God, He will take care of you when you are widowed.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a good example of widowhood. The last time her husband, Joseph, is mentioned in the Bible was when Jesus was twelve years old and got missing in the temple in Jerusalem [Lk 2: 41-50]. By the time Jesus was 30 and began His earthly ministry, Mary was presumably already widowed. I doubt if her husband’s carpentry business survived thereafter. She was left with a “controversial” firstborn Son, Jesus, who was the target of both the Jewish leaders and Roman rulers. Her younger sons, James, Joses, Simon and Judas, and daughters [Matt. 13: 55-56] were skeptical about their elder brother and hardly supported His ministry. It was left for Mary to hold the home together by completely dedicating her life to God’s service.

At the wedding in Cana, she was there and did not hide her absolute trust in her famous Son when she told the servants, “Whatever He says to you, do it” [Jn 2: 5]. At His crucifixion, she was at the foot of the cross [Jn 19: 25]. By the time of His ascension, Mary had succeeded in bringing His brothers into His ministry, and she and her sons were in “one accord in prayer and supplication” with the disciples and received with them the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost [Acts 1: 14-15; 2: 1-4]. James, her son after Jesus became along with Peter and John the pillars of the early church [Gal. 2: 9]. He and his younger brother, Judas (or Jude) were to contribute significant works that are today part of the New Testament.

Like Mary, your widowhood can be a blessing to your community and your God. If God is proud of you, He will treat you as His wife and your widowhood will never put you to shame. God is the widow’s husband.