

Ruth 3: 1 - 5, 4: 13 - 17

Psalm 127

Hebrews 9: 24 - 28

Mark 12: 38 - 44

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

The Temple in Jerusalem, like all temples in the Levant - regardless of which deity was worshipped - was divided into courts. These courts were areas of increasing holiness as one approached the central sanctuary. The courts were named not for whom the courts were reserved, but for who could go that far but no closer to the Sanctuary. In the first century Temple, these areas were:

- The Court of the Gentiles - this was, ironically, the largest of the areas. Anyone who was not defiled could enter this area. At its border was a barrier marked by signs warning non-Jews to go no farther. When a group of Gentiles approached Philip and said, "Sir, we would see Jesus," it is at this barrier that this conversation most likely took place. Jesus was teaching in one of the inner courts and the Gentiles could not come past the barrier to see him.
- The Court of Women was open to any Jew, male or female. Most public acts of worship took place in this court and it was here that the events in this Sunday's Gospel Lesson took place.
- The Court of Israelites was open to any Jewish man. As it was the smallest of the four courts, most worship occurred in the Court of Women as noted above.
- The Court of Priests was limited to priests. It was in this area that animal sacrifices were made and were burned on the altar. This court extended into the Sanctuary building itself.
- The Holy of Holies was the final court. This area, in the back of the Sanctuary, was limited to God himself except on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when one priest would enter it to offer atonement for the people's sins. Zachariah was fulfilling this role when he encountered the angel who announced the coming birth of Zachariah's son, John the Baptist.

Offerings were made in the Court of Women. There were thirteen chests in which offerings were placed set around the walls of this court. These chests were cone-shaped; small at the top and large at the bottom so that they resembled trumpets. (In referring to these chests, they are called "the trumpets" in the Talmud.)

Specific offerings were placed in specific trumpets. The first two were reserved for the half-shekel tax that every Jew paid each year for the upkeep of the Temple. The third and fourth was where women placed the money to purchase turtledoves for the sacrifice of purification. (It was in one of these trumpets that Mary would have placed her offering for two turtledoves after Jesus' birth.) The fifth trumpet was for contributions for the wood used in the Temple, the sixth

for the incense, and the seventh for the Temple's gold vessels. The next two trumpets' purpose was interesting: if one had brought a certain amount of money for a sin offering and paid less than they expected, the "change" went into the eighth or ninth trumpet. The tenth trumpet was for offerings of birds, the eleventh for offerings of the Nazarites, the twelfth was for offerings of a cleansed leper, and the thirteenth was for voluntary offerings.

This system of designated trumpets for designated offerings was what allowed Jesus to contrast the difference of those rich people who had given "out of their abundance" to the poor woman who gave "all she had".

Incidentally, there were many small copper coins of little value used during the first century. Most likely, the term "widow's mite" would refer to any or all of these coins. Such coins were extremely common as such first century coins are often found in abundance during archaeological excavations.