The incident described in today’s gospel takes place toward the end of the public life of Jesus. He is in Jerusalem and has just come from the temple where a number of Jewish leaders have confronted him and sought to trip him up in one way or another. His last words to and about them were direct and challenging. They provide a context for our appreciation of what he now says about the widow and her gift of two small coins.

“Beware of the scribes,” Jesus warns his disciples, beware of those who present themselves as learned in the law but who are hypocrites. “They devour widows’ houses” he says, “and, for the sake of appearances, say long prayers.”

Widows, often in conjunction with orphans and sojourners, are mentioned a number of times both in the Mosaic Law and in the teaching of the prophets. They stand for all those who find themselves in need including the poor and the hungry, the sick and the homeless. The Gospels make clear that those who are able to come to their help have a moral obligation to do so.

In the present context, Jesus contrasts the scribes and the way they take advantage of widows and others with the widow who voluntarily contributes all that she has to what is described here as the “treasury,” a means of gathering and distributing donations for the poor.

The emphasis in today’s reading is on the widow and her generosity. Unlike those who “have given out of their abundance,” Jesus says, “she, out of her poverty, has put in all she had to live on.”

As so often in the Gospels, Jesus, in order to capture our attention, is exaggerating to some degree when he declares that the woman contributed all that she had to live on. Even as we recognize that, we can’t help but think of what her gift reveals about both her and of the way in which she and others like her are abused and taken advantage of by those who are supposed to represent the great moral and social teaching of the biblical tradition.

Widows in ancient Israel had no inheritance rights. Most had to depend for support on their children or on charity. The situation of orphans was similar. They represent the “little people” of whom Jesus often speaks, people who for whatever reason find themselves in situations of need.

If today’s reading reminds us of the plight of widows and others then and now, the focus in it is on the generosity of the woman. She is poor and yet she is generous to the point, some have suggested, of being foolish in giving away all that she has.

In saying that the widow donated more than the rich, Jesus is not talking about amounts of money. His focus is on the meaning of her action and the depth of the generosity which inspired it. It is no exaggeration to say that in doing what she is doing, she is giving of her self. Her gesture points to the self-giving love of Jesus which will soon come to a climax in his death on the cross.

A highlight in the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John is the washing of the feet of the disciples by Jesus. His purpose in doing what he has done, he says, is to give the disciples an example which they are to follow. In saying that he is talking not about a physical washing of feet but of caring for and serving one another. As if to underline that fact, he solemnly declares, “This is my commandment that you love one another, as I have loved you.”

In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus sums up the deeper meaning of his preaching, teaching and healing ministry by declaring, “I have come not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for the many.”

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul encourages us to “Be imitators of God … and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Once again, Jesus is offered to us in his self-giving love as a model of the kind of life to which we are called by God.

Love, service and generosity – three words which the story of the widow and her gift to the temple treasury evoke. Love is the first and most fundamental of the three. It defines who we are and how we are to interact with others and with the world. It is a bond which, in different ways, unites us to others as well as to Christ. God as revealed to us in the self-giving of Jesus is a mystery of infinite love.

Love, once it enters our heart can’t help but overflow into acts that serve the well being of those whom we love. To love is to want to share our gifts and talents and, in a special way, to come to the aid of those in need.

To grow in love is, among other things, to grow in generosity, a quality of soul or spirit that draws us closer to God who, in Jesus, has been revealed to us as a mystery of self-giving love.