

Dear sisters and brothers,

I guess most of you recognise what I have in my hand and where I got it from. And I'm sure that you may have one the same at home.

It's a bottle of herbal olive oil. A few weeks ago the children of Kids Club sold bottles like this to collect money for the children's project in South Africa.

Today we mainly use oil for baking and cooking for example making salad. We use it, too, for hair and body care. We find especially olive oil in lotions and I used plain olive oil as a hair conditioner some years ago.

In Bible times, oil was one of the most important groceries.. The people made bread from oil and flour according to the law. Oil was used for anointing as well. Lack of oil was a sign of great poverty.

In our story today, a woman is in big trouble and everything already seems to be too late. Only a miracle could save the situation. And as I will read the story to you, you will see that unbelievable miracles do happen. I'm going to read 2 Kings 4: 1- 7:

The Widow's oil

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant, my husband is dead and you know that he revered the LORD. But now his creditor is coming to take my two sons as his slaves."

Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?"

"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little oil."

Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few.

Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."

She left him and afterward shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring.

When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one." But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing.

She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your son can live on what is left."

I guess, we all understand why this widow is so desperate. Her husband has died, what a great loss for the family. Not only is the woman alone now with her two sons and facing a life without her beloved husband, but she also has financial problems. Is it all too late?

It seems so. According to the law, if a man's debt is unpaid when he dies, the creditor may seize the debtor's property and children. And without her sons, the woman has no one who will care for her in the future.

I could understand it if this lady just gave up. No chance, no miracle, let's wait for death. Like the widow at Zaraphath who another prophet, Elijah, once met. She also had nothing left and she was willing to give up, even to die. She said to Elijah: "I don't

have any bread- only a handful flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son that we may eat it- and die.” (1 king 17:12)

Perhaps we, like the widow, have financial problems. We don't know how to pay our debts or even the rent for next month.

Or we have lost someone who has been close to us. Perhaps this person has died or has just moved to another city or we had an argument with a friend and she or he doesn't speak to us any more. Whatever our situation, we may feel, like the widow, alone, helpless and desperate.

The woman in our story meets Elisha and I can imagine that she has been thinking, something like: “Alright, he is my last chance! I won't let it pass. Perhaps Elisha can help us. He is a man of God and knew my husband well.”

So she runs to him and cries out her needs, reminds Elisha that her husband used to follow him in the company of the prophets. He has believed in God and has been active in the fellowship of Elisha.

How good, that Elisha is passing at this particular moment! And what does he say? He says: “How can I help you? Tell me - what do you have in your house?”

I have thought about Elisha's reaction. And I have to admit, that I would have said something totally different. Perhaps something like: “Oh, no. I don't know what to say...I feel really sorry for you. It must be so hard for you and your sons. How are they doing? I hope you can cope with the whole situation...”.

I think that Elisha knows that this isn't any time to make speeches. It is one of those critical moments that demands immediate, personal and direct involvement in the problem at hand.

The widow doesn't have anything except a little bit of oil. What can you do with a bit of oil? I can imagine that she felt rather embarrassed that this was the only thing that she could offer to the prophet. But she dared to give everything she had even though it was so little. It takes courage to admit to others that we need anything and that we need other people to help because we can't cope with our difficulties any more.

Elisha continues to speak in a straightforward way without commenting on the little the widow has got, and he knows exactly what to do. He commissions her to go to her neighbours and to borrow a lot of empty jars.-

How can that help to pay back the debts and save the family? It sounds ridiculous. And the following instructions that Elisha gives her, don't sound any better: “Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars and as each is filled, put it to one side.”

The widow's trust is greater than any doubts. She does what he has told her. There is no discussing, no asking, only doing what he's said..

At this point another story comes to my mind:

Five loaves of bread and two fish. The disciples of Jesus had five loaves of bread and two fish, nothing more. The problem was that they had to feed 5000 people as Jesus had told them. And they shared it without asking how everyone would have enough, and they experienced a miracle: “They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.” (Matthew 14:20)

In some situations it takes a lot of faith and trust to go forward.

Let's go back to the story.

So she fetches the jars from her neighbours' houses, just as many as she can carry, goes home, closes the door behind her and her sons and does exactly what Elisha has told her.

The interesting thing is that Elisha has only given her some instructions but he doesn't do anything active. He could have given her a big bag of silver coins saying: "Go to your debtor and pay your debts." I'm sure that's because he doesn't only want to help her in this specific situation, but he wants to help her in the long term.. That strengthens her self-esteem, as she says to herself, " With the advice of the prophet I get a chance to help myself and I don't have to feel as helpless as before."

With the help of her sons the widow fills all the jars with this little bit of oil. And the oil stops flowing once the last jar is filled.

I guess the woman and her sons can't believe what has just happened. I think she has heard about the miracles of the prophets before, but it is a great difference to witness one with your own eyes..

The oil has been multiplied. By Elisha? If we look closely at the story, we will discover that Elisha wasn't around when the miracle happened. I'm sure that the widow knew that God did the miracle. God's goodness and his care shine through his servants onto the people who need help.

For us today, it's quite hard to believe in miracles. Often we want to explain everything by reason. There must be an explanation for everything and anything that can't be explained is not true or real.

It takes a step of faith to see miracles in our lives. I will give you one example. My parents and my youngest sister wanted to go on holiday on New Year's Eve last year. Two days before they were about to leave, my dad was looking for my sister's passport and he couldn't find it. We looked for it, absolutely desperate, in every cupboard, in every drawer- nothing. We didn't know what to do. That night my dad looked for some books to take on holiday and he took one book off the shelf and thought about whether to take it or not. He opened it - and guess what he discovered: the passport of my sister. Coincidence? Perhaps.

I took the step of faith and thanked God for these many coincidences that led us to the hidden passport.

The widow is so happy about this miracle that saves her life. I wonder if she had any clue what to do with so much oil. She goes to Elisha and tells him the whole story. So he gives her the last instruction: "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left."

The miracle has happened to change her situation. Now she can pay her debts and her sons don't have to go into slavery.

For the first time in the story Elisha is named as a man of God. Just as God's eye is on the needy and destitute people, so the man of God acts to meet the personal needs of people living life day to day. God's intervention isn't mentioned in the whole story. Nevertheless we see what God is doing in the woman's life.

Often, if we are in difficult situations, we feel like God isn't with us. We feel alone and forgotten. The story shows that God's help and care are present in the help that we get from other people.

It takes faith to trust in people, especially if people have treated us badly, and to experience how empty jars are filled in our life. We all lack different kinds of things: material things or emotional support.

And sometimes it doesn't cost much to meet these needs. At Peace Church there are many examples of people who help other people by giving clothes, sharing food, taking care of children, giving money, time and energy.

Sisters and brothers, it's all about sharing life with each other. It's about sharing the good and happy times, having fun, laughing together and it's about sharing the bad and sad times, crying, mourning together.

A reading from the "Kids help kids" service, that we had a few weeks ago, expresses this in a simple but beautiful way:

"Jesus says: Come to me! I share with you my bread, my wine, my life. If you do the same, you won't have less, you'll be very happy."

For me, one of the biggest and also one of the most challenging tasks of the church is to meet the different needs of the people. People come to church to seek God and a loving community. And we know that people come to church because they need material things, too.

Jesus himself challenges us by saying:

"I tell you the truth: whatever you did for the one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Every one of us can be a needy person all of a sudden and the same person can help and give in a different situation. It's not possible that one person is always giving and sharing and another one is only receiving or always being the needy person.

We are all women and men of God. And our belief in Jesus contains two aspects: the first one to love God with all our heart and have a living relationship to Jesus and the second one to love and care for our neighbours. It's so important that we consider both aspects together, because one can't stand without the other. A faith that is only lived privately and without any fellowship cannot be enriched by the experiences that others have in their spiritual life. Christian faith has consequences in our daily life and especially in our dealings with people.

Social engagement can be tough and frustrating. It's good to know that we as Christians can relate this to our relationship to God. We are connected with him. So God's love can encourage us to love our neighbours. We can count on God's power so we don't have to do it on our own. We can see that in the story of the widow: even though God's involvement in the whole miracle is not that obvious, we do know that Elisha, as a man of God, acted in God's will.

My wish for you at Peace Church, is that you will always have open eyes for the people who are in any need. It is already a blessing to so many people that you do this. It's good to see that people can have a home here, no matter where they come from, and that they find support that gives hope for the future. Stick close to God because he is the source of the life, love and strength that we need in our daily life. Even as I go home today, I'm glad to know that we will still be connected through prayers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.