

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 10.11.2019 Luke 20.27-40

Every Sunday for some weeks, in our Gospels, Jesus has journeyed to Jerusalem to die. As he drew in sight of the city, he wept with sorrow for the terrible fate that awaited the holy site at the bloody hands of the Roman invaders if it would not change its ways to gentleness and its pathways to peace.

In the massive Temple, having driven out the merchants selling sacrificial animals there, Jesus taught for some days. His drastic action made him an enemy of the Sadducees, the aristocrats in control of the high priestly offices. The word Sadducee came from Zadok, once a priest-helper of David, whose name is sung in the English coronation anthem [2 Samuel 15]. Sadducees accepted as authoritative only the first five of the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Torah. Nowhere in these five books was a hint of the afterlife. Sadducees were Sad-u-see.

In reading from the prophets and Psalms, the second group of Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees, found justification for belief in the resurrection of the dead. Anxious with the jots and tittles of law, Pharisees needed an afterlife, a place beyond the boundaries of this life, where their notion of God would exact signal justice on the perceived unjust. Foremost among the unjust in their eyes were the hated Romans, who exerted crushing control over her vast empire. The Pharisees believed, there must come a day of reckoning where God would vindicate the good who died without having the chance to enjoy the fruit of their goodness.

Today's Gospel was originally scripted by Luke, the evangelist, while nursing his friend Paul, who was on death row in Rome in 67CE. The Gospel, as we know it, was finally compiled as late as 100 CE. Thirty years before this, brutal Rome had destroyed the Judaism of the Holy land in a bloodlust that may have killed a million souls. When Luke's later compilers came to think of God's promises of victory of life over death, they opined that the Gospel needed a resurrection of the dead, so that the account could be balanced and not let bloody Rome have the last word. God and Christianity must have that.

In today's Gospel account, the Sadducees interrupted Jesus' Temple teaching with an imaginary marital scene of seven brothers, who, one by one, died childless. Their troublesome action was aimed at making a fool of Jesus by having him renounce his belief in the resurrection of the dead. Not only would these rigid conservatives try to discredit Jesus, this high-priestly caste hoped it could also ensnare the Pharisees in his nonsense and embarrass them, too, in their false belief in a resurrection.

In the highly patriarchal culture of Jesus' day, it was very odd that men even troubled themselves to debate the ownership of a childless woman after her death. But, alas! in all patriarchal societies the female body always becomes the feature of male theological regulation. Even the non-existent children were described in relation to their would-be fathers as "all seven men died childless."

In the trap set by the Sadducees, Jesus was tempted into the no-win territory between the no-resurrection Sadducees and the pro-resurrection Pharisees. Jesus appeared to be in a quandary. If he said that all seven brothers will be the woman's husbands, he will alienate

everyone. People can imagine a man having seven wives; Henry VIII was well on the way with six, but, in the Jewish way, a woman just cannot have seven husbands. Jesus faced a lose-lose situation?

To demonstrate their failure to fully understand Scripture, Jesus quoted from Exodus 3.6, the second book in the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures. It was a passage the Sadducees would accept as kosher. It was the story of the then shepherd Moses encountering the burning bush. Here, the living God spoke the present tense to affirm to him that the long-earthly-dead patriarchs of Judaism, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who lived six hundred years before Moses, were in heavenly love abiding and very much alive.

In the similar account in Mark [12,24], Jesus became angry, asserting, "Why you are wrong is that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" [Mark 12.24]. As he told the hearers today, the Torah Law they professed had no bearing in heaven, because there, God is the God of the living, not a God of the dead. All there are alive in him.

What else do we know of the afterlife? Will our new bodies be physical? Jesus rose bodily from the dead. Mary Magdalene did not recognize him at first. She didn't see him, because she didn't expect to see him. When he spoke her name, she immediately recognized him. Later, he ate fish in his post-resurrection physical body to prove he was no ghost. Doubting Thomas was urged to touch reality: "put your finger here. Don't be faithless any longer." Will our new bodies be permanent and immortal? Paul wrote "Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when they die, but they will be raised to live forever" [1 Corinthians 16.42]. In heaven, they won't age nor decay; they won't grow weak nor feeble. There will be no need for nurses, doctors and hospitals. Will our new bodies be recognizable? Risen Jesus showed Thomas his crucifixion scars, and he responded "My Lord and my God!" [John 20.28]. My Colleen may have to put up with a bald Walter and forget the George Clooney look-alike she had hoped for.

What about the Sadducees' question of marriage? The people with whom we have shared our lives most intimately will not be lost to us, nor will we lose the memories we have built up over a life-time. But, it seems that the togetherness of earthly marriage will be superseded by the depth and diversity of a whole new life in the presence of God. There will be no need for procreation, since our bodies will last forever. We will all live somehow as sisters and brothers, in an emotional intimacy and affection of heart not restricted to one's spouse, as one large family in perfect intimacy with our bridegroom, Jesus. Will we have just changed our address and moved into the fuller presence of our God?

How many will be with us? Predating our Sunday Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed posits that between the time of Jesus' death and resurrection, "he descended to the dead." The Anglican Articles of Religion (no.3) adds "He went down into Hell." This was the Jewish "Sheol," the place of shades, the abode of everyone who had died since the beginning of the world, to whom he brought salvation to its righteous captives. Note: his invitation to rise with him went even to the non-believing Sadducees. Then followed the Anglican teaching called "The Harrowing of Hell." That is, Risen Jesus raked over, harrowed Hell, closing that holding pen forever. He is the God, not of the dead, but of the living, for "in him, all are alive." Now, that is comfort, indeed!