

Sunday 6th November

Job 19:23-27a

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-end

Luke 20:27-38

In a few weeks time we will be holding our annual memorial service. We will invite those families for whom we have taken funerals this year, but the service will be open to anyone who wishes to come. There will be an opportunity to remember our loved ones and we will offer a message of comfort and hope.

At the funeral services I take I talk about the Christian hope – I think it is what distinguishes a Christian funeral from a secular one. But – I wonder - what do we understand by that hope? What is the Christian hope?

In our gospel reading today we meet the Sadducees – one of the few times we come across them in the Bible. They were a grouping within Judaism – different from mainstream Jews and Pharisees – in that they only held to the first five books of our Old Testament as being inspired scripture and they didn't believe in the resurrection. This life is all there is. When you are dead you are dead. There is nothing to hope for beyond what we see around us. For me that's not a very exciting or hopeful position to hold. (If you're unsure of what these different groups believe, you can easily remember that Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection because they were sad you see).

They came to Jesus with a well rehearsed question. We should note that they weren't really seeking to find out Jesus' view or even to find an answer to the question; they were trying to make a point that the resurrection is not believable, that it can't be true. Anyway, they put a convoluted scenario to Jesus about brothers, marriage and death based on the law that if a man who is married and childless dies, his brother should marry his widow in order to have a family. The question was basically in the resurrection whose wife would the woman be? It was all about trying to prove the foolishness of believing in the resurrection.

Not so said Jesus. The resurrection is different. In the resurrection there is no marriage. There is no need for marriage as there is no need for procreation. Life is eternal. In the resurrection people will be more like angels – the implication being that our relationships with each other and with will be on a different level.

So I wonder how Jesus' answer makes you feel.

One of the messages I often pick up at funerals is the idea of being reunited with loved ones – particularly spouses who have died before. We see it on gravestones – Ethel reunited with her husband Charlie or whatever. And that's all very well if the marriage was happy and good and fulfilling. But what if it were an abusive, or unhappy or dysfunctional marriage. Would the couple be destined to spend eternity together in the way they had spent their lives? Or what if someone married again after their partner died. We would have a similar conundrum to the one Sadducees put forward. Whose partner would they be in the resurrection?

The other point Jesus made to the Sadducees was one based on books of Moses they believed in. When God appeared to Moses he said he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – this being long after the earthly lives of these three had ended. God is not the God of the dead, Jesus said, but the God of the living. There is therefore resurrection. The Sadducees were wrong. But it's interesting he used three men from the same family to make this point. From this I infer that there must be something eternal about family relationships.

But what is this resurrection life like?

The Bible doesn't paint a clear picture here. There are some pointers, but they don't all seem to be pointing in the same direction. It's as if we are trying to look for detail through fog or through misted glass. We cannot see the detail – we can just see some vague outlines.

But I think there is one thing we can safely say. The resurrection life will be on a different plane to life now. And a better plane. In the book of Revelation we read that mourning and crying and pain and death will be no more after the resurrection. And Jesus' comments about being like angels backs this up.

But we do know some things about the resurrection life from the example of Jesus rising from the dead. After his resurrection he was physical and human but more so. He could eat and drink, yet he could seemingly walk through locked doors. Although at times he was not recognised, at other times his actions made plain who he was. He still enjoyed relationships with those he cared about, and we see those relationships deepening. The resurrection life, then, is not some mysterious spiritual existence but something physical and real but also different from what we experience now.

The Sadducees – as we have said – did not believe in the resurrection. We know from history that they were a group who were among the leaders of the society, well off, well educated, collaborators with the Roman occupiers. Life for them was good. Maybe they feared a resurrection and any final judgement it might bring.

Throughout his life Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God; he talked about life in its fullness. There would, he said, be glimpses of this new kind of life now, but it would be fully realised in the age to come. Sadly the Sadducees could not see beyond what they had now.

Our Old Testament reading today comes from the book of Job. We are introduced to Job – a righteous man. He is wealthy, healthy and is surrounded by his family. One could say he was blessed by God. Everything was good.

Then his flocks were stolen, his servants murdered, his house destroyed and his children killed. And he was stuck down with a terrible skin disease.

Three friends came to console him, but all they could do was tell him he must have sinned in some way as this was a punishment from God. Job maintained his innocence and decided to have it out with God. So he complained to God about what he saw as his unjust treatment. He told God he wished he had never been born. But then in his rant of despair come the words we had in that first reading today:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,

Words of hope while he was in his darkest place. Words that look forward to some kind of resurrection.

Its interesting too that he didn't utter such words when all was well. At time when all was well he was much like the Sadducees. Seeing all that he had as reward from God. Not needing nor desiring any hope of better things to come.

The world around us is far from good, far from ideal, far from what God would have of it. Inequality, injustice, abuse, violence, mistrust, poverty and so on. One of the central tenets of the Christian faith is that this is NOT all there is. It will not always be as it is now. Ultimately good will defeat evil. Ultimately justice and righteousness will abound. Ultimately the Kingdom of God will be fully established and life can and will be lived in all its fullness. This is the resurrection life we hope for. As we have said, we cannot say exactly what that life will look like, but we do know it will be infinitely better in every way to what we have now – including in the relationships we have.

Its effectively recognising that we don't have all the solutions; that human beings cannot make everything good; that we need to look beyond ourselves. It is saying – as we said last week – that fulfilment and contentment can only come when we know our need of God.