

THE GOD OF THE LIVING

Job 19. 23-27a

2 Thessalonians 2. 1-5, 13-17

Luke 20. 27-38

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I wonder if you have ever heard the story about the young curate who had just started to minister in his first parish. One of the churchwardens, who was a highly-respected member of the congregation, came by to see the curate on a Sunday afternoon. The churchwarden said, 'Father, I've got something to tell you. I've never told this to a soul, and it's extremely difficult to tell you this now, but my wife and I have had rows almost every day for the past 30 years of our marriage.'

The curate was taken back. He nervously took a sip of his tea. He didn't know what to say. After a brief pause he asked, 'Every day?' The warden replied, 'Yes, just about every day.' The curate queried, 'Did you argue today before you came to church?' The answer was 'Yes.' The priest then said, 'Well, how did it end up?' Looking gravely at the curate, the warden replied, 'She came crawling to me on her hands and knees.' Surprised, the curate said, 'My goodness. What did she say?' The warden answered, 'Come out from under that bed, you coward, and fight like a man!'

The gospel text appointed for today recalls a row that was going on among religious leaders of Jesus's time. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were in constant struggle over the subject of life after death. Almost wherever these two groups met, this subject came up; and each group tried to persuade its listeners that its point of view was right.

The Pharisees believed that God revealed his will not just in the first five books of the Bible, but also that he continued to speak to and through his people in their changing circumstances. The Pharisees therefore felt free to add new teachings to the Hebrew scriptures, and to complement the list of what was then considered authoritative. One of these new teachings was the belief that God would raise the dead. The Pharisees believed that the righteous would receive their reward, and that the wicked would be raised in order to receive punishment.

The Sadducees were horrified by these theological innovations, and were probably even more horrified as the Pharisees became more popular and gained power in the Sanhedrin (the council of leaders) in Jerusalem. So when they saw that Jesus of Nazareth was teaching as the Pharisees did about scripture and even about the resurrection, they decided to confront him.

At the heart of their question was the custom of what is called 'levirate marriage'. According to this custom, if a man's married brother died without leaving an heir, the man had to marry the widow (Deut 25. 5-6). This law, found in the book of Deuteronomy, was a good law for this time in biblical history. It meant that a widow had another possibility of bearing children who would take care of her in old age.

However, the tricky question was not about the law or to whom the widow would be married. The question was really about what heaven was going to be like. 'Is there an afterlife? Will people really be raised from the dead?' Our Lord responded to the Sadducees' questions very patiently. He not only affirmed the doctrine of the resurrection, but also gave a brief teaching on life after death in four points.

The first point Jesus made is that life here on earth, and life after death are not alike. The Jews of Jesus's day thought that the kingdom of heaven was only an extension of the good things in this life. Christ made it clear that the life in the eternal state is more than just an extension of what we have here.

Secondly, there is no marriage in 'that age'. Our Lord did not say that we would not know our wives or husbands in the age to come, but rather that the relationship would be different.

Thirdly, there is no death in 'that age'. Jesus identifies the quality of life in that age as eternal.

And fourthly, the redeemed will be 'like' the angels in heaven, seeing, serving and praising God.

Having made these points, Christ went on to prove that these ideas are biblically based. There are a number of Old Testament texts that our Lord could have cited which speak of the resurrection (Isa 26.19; Dan 12. 2); but since the Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, Jesus appealed to the book of Exodus, in which the story of Moses and the burning bush is given.

Christ said, 'And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'

Our Lord reasons that when God stated in the third chapter of Exodus (and using the present tense), ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob’ (3. 6), this statement makes no sense if those patriarchs are not presently alive.

Today’s gospel passage does not include the response of the Sadducees, but if we were to read on, we would find they congratulated Jesus on his logic and his use of scripture. They were amazed that he could do what the Pharisees could not do: to prove from scripture there was some reference to life after death.

What does all of this have to do with us today?

Well, as we consider the resurrection and the afterlife, and particularly as we approach Remembrance Day, we realise that our lives can be lived with a certain amount of hope, a certain amount of daring, a certain amount of adventure, and a certain amount of confidence. The promise of the resurrection gives our current lives a new dimension.

If we are assured of heaven, we can live differently because of that assurance. We can live for God and respond to him with our entire beings. The promise of eternal life was celebrated for us at our baptism; and it was a source of rejoicing for us at our confirmation. This promise of eternal life is one that we can claim today and every day.

Christ says, ‘Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living.’ Thanks be to God.