

THEIR DEATH IS NOT IN VAIN

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.

A man once found himself on a train between two ladies. In this instance it was an unpleasant experience, as the two ladies argued incessantly about whether the window should be shut or open. The lady furthest from the window argued that she would die of heat stroke if it wasn't opened. The other said she would almost certainly catch pneumonia if it didn't stay closed. When the ticket inspector arrived the ladies appealed to him to adjudicate on the issue. Unfortunately he had no solution. Eventually the man spoke up. 'First open the window. That will kill the one. Then close it. That will kill the other. Then we will have peace.'

Many people have a concept of peace similar to the man in this story. For them peace is the absence of conflict. However this falls far short of the biblical vision. In Scripture peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of love, generosity and grace as the transforming principle of our relationships.

On this Remembrance Sunday we express our gratitude and respect to those who gave their lives so that there may be peace. We remember the evil that is war, and we renew our resolve to maintain a positive peace which is more than just the absence of conflict.

For many people, Remembrance Sunday is a day of mixed emotions. On one hand, some experience pain and grief as they remember those whose lives ended tragically and prematurely; but there is, perhaps, also comfort in the knowledge that those who lost their lives did not die in vain. They gave their lives for a greater cause, and for

them death is not the end. However secular our society may have grown, there is still a strong belief in heaven and a hope of going there. This also helps to put our grief into some perspective.

As we draw towards the season of Advent and think both of the first and the second comings of our Lord, it is appropriate that our Bible readings lead us towards its teachings about life after death. In the epistle reading, the writer is dealing with the anxieties of the Christian community in Thessalonica. There are rumours going round that Jesus has already come, and that the Thessalonians may have missed it. They are to be reassured: Christ has not already come again, and the Thessalonians are indeed among those chosen as the 'first-fruits' for salvation. The members of the church in Thessalonica are also reminded of the teaching that they received, to stand firm and hold to what they learnt and accepted when they first became believers. They are not to worry, but rather to trust in God.

In the passage taken from St Luke's gospel, our Lord is in a dispute with the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a sect at the time of Jesus who were rivals of the Pharisees and who had primary authority over the Temple. They only recognised the first five books of Moses as being fully authoritative, and for this reason did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (which is not referenced in the Pentateuch). The Sadducees told their story of the unfortunate widow who lost seven brother-husbands. They thought that this was a solid argument¹ proving the folly of believing in the resurrection. Christ responded in two ways: he challenged the way that the Sadducees thought; and he chided them not paying full attention to Moses.

Firstly, he said to the Sadducees, your thought-lines are closed. You do not understand what life in the resurrection means. As we would say in modern parlance, you need to think outside of the box! Life in the resurrection transcends earthly

¹ Using Deut 25. 5-10 as a basis.

things like marriage. Resurrection life is qualitatively different, compared to life here and now.

Secondly, the Sadducees had obviously misunderstood the story of Moses and his encounter with God in the burning bush and the revelation of God's holy name.² Our Lord says that that passage in Exodus establishes the certainty of life after death. It declares that God *is* (present tense) the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; not that God *was* their God. Therefore, Jesus concludes, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must in some sense still be alive; hence the necessity of the resurrection. If the Sadducees claimed to be following Moses and the first five books of the Bible, they needed to accept all of its teaching.

Our Scripture readings therefore give us encouragement about life after death, however tragic that death may be. To conclude I want to return to this idea of Remembrance Sunday as a day which honours those who risked all for a greater purpose. These men and women were heroes, in the true sense of the word. When someone dies prematurely it can seem very futile. It seems to be a waste of life. When we think of the millions who die young in war, the sense of futility can be overwhelming; and we can be driven to despair wondering whether there is any value to life and living.

On this Remembrance Sunday, let us remind ourselves that today, we honour heroes who risked all for a greater purpose. I am reminded of the words that make up the finale of Gustav Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony*. Mahler, you will remember, was a well-known music composer who was born in what is now known as the Czech Republic in the 19th century. The words of his finale are very simple, but they are inspiring. I quote:

² Cf. Ex 3.

O believe, my heart,
O believe
Nothing of you will be lost;
What you longed for is yours,
Yours what you loved,
O believe,
you were not born in vain!
(O believe, you) Have not vainly lived
and suffered!
(Remember) What you championed.

Amen.