

Sermon for 6th November 2022, Year C, 3rd Before Advent

Preached at All Saints, Biddenden and St Michael, Smarden

Job 19:23-27a; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-end; Luke 20:27-38

Sermon

At this time of year between All Souls Day and Remembrance Sunday it is perhaps no surprise that our assigned bible readings are all references to faith in life after death. The reading from Job, the letter from St Paul to the Thessalonians, and the gospel of Luke, all explore ideas about what that eternal life might be like.

We should however bear in mind that the time between the book of Job and the writings of Luke and Paul was around 700 years, and ideas about life beyond death changed quite radically during that time.

If we were to examine today the Christian views of 700 years ago in the high middle-ages with its great emphasis on the physical torments of hell, we would probably recognise that theological opinions do change over time, and that even in the bible, what seemed true and uncontentious in 600BC, no longer held sway by the time of Jesus.

So, as we read these texts, we must be careful not to jump on a word or phrase that seems clear and then declare that we are now sure of God's eternal plan.

The gospel of Luke gives us a perfect example of this disagreement and uncertainty. The Sadducees who questioned Jesus were the spiritual and educated elite of Jesus' day. Their powerbase was the Temple in Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish faith. They were the undisputed establishment of their time and place. Their holy texts were the Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible, which they believed were literally written by Moses, and all their rules for society

came from these books. If it wasn't written down there, it couldn't be God's will.

From the Sadducees' perspective, there could be no life after death. At death, they believed everyone, whether good or bad, descended into what they called Sheol, an underworld of shadows, cut off from God, from which there is no return.

This view was unchallenged until the last few centuries before Jesus. By the second century BC, the idea had formed that those who have died will one day return to life and be judged according to the wisdom of their deeds. A new sect, the Pharisees, emerged, and used relatively new writings such as the book of Daniel to show how we must choose to act well while we are alive, so that we may receive eternal life with God as our reward.

Ethics accordingly began to shift from following religious rules simply because 'God said so' with penalties being poverty, sickness, and early death, to following the rules because of eternal consequences of hell and heaven for our immortal souls. And not only just following the rules, but becoming living embodiments of those rules, being transformed by them.

You can probably see why it's so important to explore the context if we want to understand what is going on in this debate between Jesus and the Sadducees in Luke's gospel. This was not only 'upstart country rabbi vs establishment hierarchy', but also new insights versus ancient tradition.

The Sadducees are trying to dismiss Jesus as a bit of a country idiot by proving that his teachings make no sense. Rather like a politician or journalist during election season, they propose a hypothetical situation that they believe proves that Jesus is talking nonsense: In their holy scriptures, Moses, the liberator of Israel from Egypt, said that if a man dies before his wife has children, his brother must then marry that wife in order that the family name might continue.

So, what if there are seven brothers and they all marry their sister-in-law, one after another? If there's life after death, which of them gets to be married to her?

The Sadducees clearly see this as 'checkmate, Jesus'. Their thought experiment has been carefully designed in their own version of a social media echo chamber. No doubt they all clicked 'like' and retweeted it to their friends.

Jesus, though, who, as the Son of God, knows there is eternal life after death, offers the answer that the Sadducees haven't even thought of. He breaks the hypothesis apart by declaring that those who go to heaven are like angels who don't need to marry and have children because they live forever with God.

Jesus then goes on to quote Moses as an argument against the Sadducees' position, which is similar to a politician quoting from an opponent's own leader to prove them wrong. When God spoke with Moses from the burning bush, he argues, he didn't say that he *used to be* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who had died many centuries earlier, but that he still is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who must therefore still be alive.

And then comes the punchline, and why this gospel reading is so important during this period of remembrance. God is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to God *everyone* is alive. Jesus taught that with God, everyone who has died in all kinds of circumstances remain as alive as we are, perhaps even more alive than we are. All those who fought and died in war, and those we have loved and lost among our families and friends, none of them is lost to God.

And because of their connection with God, they are also still alive to us. We do not live without them. We are today, with them, the complete people of God.

Now, it's true that Jesus doesn't tell us very much about the nature of eternal life. There's enough vagueness in his teaching that Christians have come to different conclusions about what it might mean to be resurrected. Some have believed that we will become pure spirit in a heavenly realm. Others that we will

be resurrected with new bodies on a recreated and perfected earth, free from sickness and death. This is very much the realm of faith. As St Paul put it, now we see as through a glass darkly, but then we will see face to face.

If we trust the words of Jesus all we know is that one day we will be with God as children of God, alive with him and with all those who have gone before us. Beyond that we cannot know. But we do have hope, and faith, and love.

Jesus and Paul and all the saints invite us to live with kindness and generosity and goodwill towards one another, to make alive in the present time the future we long for, where cruelty and selfishness are no more, so that eventually we too will join our brothers and sisters who already live with God in that place where illness, war, cruelty, and death are no more.