

The 32nd Sunday of Year C: The hope of Resurrection.

1st Reading: 2 Maccabees 7:1-2+9-14: Martyred brothers' faith & hope; 2nd Reading: 2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5: Paul's hope for the future; Gospel: Luke 20:27-38: Some Sadducees ridicule the idea of resurrection.

Following the feasts of All Saints and All Souls last week, this Sunday's readings have a decidedly "next world" ring to them. They also remind us that we are nearing the end of the Church Year – Advent starts on November 27th. The first reading covers a bloody period of Old Testament history – religious persecution by the Greek rulers of Israel from 167 to 164 BC. They tried to stamp out Jewish practices (with help from non-practising Jewish collaborators) and met a fierce resistance – with much killing by both sides. The two books of Maccabees reflect the struggles of the Jewish resistance movement, led by Judas Maccabaeus and his family. (Neither book was accepted in the 1500's by the Reformers, so you'll need either a post-1970 missal or an RC Bible for the first reading.) The two Books of Maccabees are very different: the first tries to be balanced history; the second is sheer polemic, with some unintended funny results. In 2 Macc 15:38, the writer ends his work by admitting: "If it is well composed & to the point, that is just what I wanted; if it is trashy & mediocre, that is all I could manage." He is nothing is not honest!

What the writer does convey well is the sheer brutality of religious bigotry in a civil war situation. A family of seven brothers (with their mother) were tortured to death for refusing to break the Jewish Law. The key sentence for us is this statement of belief by the fourth brother: "Ours is the better choice, to die at men's hands, yet relying on God's promise that we shall be raised up by him..." Apart from the exciting tales of bravery by the Jewish rebels, the writer stresses the hope of a personal existence after death. By Jesus' time, just over 160 years later, this belief was widespread among the Jews – except for the members of the Sadducee party (the group of the Temple priests and the wealthy supporters of the Roman occupation). They refused to accept anything that was not in the original first 5 books of the Old Testament, as they did not think that religious doctrines could develop within the Jewish community.

This explains the gospel: a group of Sadducees met Jesus in Jerusalem. (By now, he had just ended his long trek from Galilee southwards.) They put to him a deliberately silly question to show that they thought 'resurrection' to be a silly idea. They quoted the ancient 'levirate' law, which said that if a man died childless, his brother should marry the widow and raise up children in the dead

man's name. In their example, the same woman married all seven brothers in a family – one after the other, and she had no children to any of them. In the so-called “resurrection”, whose wife would she be? I suggest you read the story, but Jesus' reply to this weird question included these words: “Those who are judged worthy of a place in the other world and in the resurrection from the dead do not marry, because they can no longer die, for they are the same as the angels.” He ends by saying, “The Lord is God, not of the dead, but of the living; for to him, all people are in face alive...”

I think that it is important to try to be clear. Many of the ancients (especially Greeks) already believed in the eternal life of the ‘soul’ – a type of disembodied spirit that was (for them) each human's life-principle. Jesus is teaching something stronger than that – in the resurrection, there will be a physical element that helps make up the whole human person, as we are both body and soul just now. The Sadducees mocked this by implying that this new life would just be a continuation of the physical life here on earth – hence their question as to whose wife the woman would be, when she had been married on earth to all seven brothers. For Jesus, the ‘body’ will be something glorious – helping us to be the individuals we already are, here on earth, but changed and glorified – just as he was to be, after Easter Sunday. It will not be just a better form of what we are now; it will be something very different - but still ‘us’.

There are many Christians who find this odd: they have accepted a way of thinking that sees many aspects of the body as ‘naughty’ or ‘sinful’ – at the very least, uncouth, and unworthy of eternity. For them, the soul is like a beautiful prisoner, chained in a vile body, and made to suffer the stains of sin. I can see where this is coming from – it was still common in prayers & devotions when I was young – but it leads to a distorted view of what makes us human. As an old professor at Ushaw told us in the 1960's, the ‘sins of the flesh’ had done less damage than had ‘the sins of the spirit’ in the two world wars he had experienced. For good or ill, we are both body and spirit – together – and that is what makes us the people we are. Both will somehow feature in the risen life.

I hope I haven't bored or confused you – at least, not too much! I don't choose the readings. However, occasionally, they impact seriously on Church teaching, and this is never more true than in our beliefs about what makes us the people we are. However awkward the language, Jesus offers us the hope that death is not the end: the life we now have will somehow continue – unrecognisable, perhaps, but still true, and still personal. *Fr Jim Dunne.*