

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 6th November 2022 – Pentecost 22

Readings: Haggai 1:15b – 2:9

2Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Psalm 98

Luke 20:27-40

I have organised many funerals over the years and generally it has been a privilege to help grieving family members give thanks for the life of someone they've loved, while assuring them of God's love. Often at the shared hospitality following a funeral people have suggested what the late friend or relative might be doing in the next life. For people who have loved golf there has been talk of them forever playing on the great golf course in the sky! Some talk about the person being reunited with loved ones who have previously died, and, for those who have been good at organising, there has even been the suggestion that this person is now helping St Peter bring order to an otherwise disorganised heaven!

Assuming you believe in a continuing identity after death, be it a soul or consciousness, I wonder what you think will happen after you physically die?

At one level it seems that 'the Saducees' in today's Gospel were asking Jesus this question, but it is likely they expected him to have no sufficient answer for it. The Saducees were a wealthy, urban, well-educated Jewish elite who derived their income from the Temple in Jerusalem. They did not believe that resurrection was possible and looked down on those Jews who did believe this. So, they posed the hypothetical question that if a woman consecutively married seven brothers whose wife would she be after resurrection?

This was a plausible scenario at the time because of the teaching in Deuteronomy and Genesis that if a man died without leaving children, his widow should marry his brother so that the family name could continue. In the scenario, if the woman was married to one of seven brothers... and was widowed at least six times, whose wife would she be after resurrection? 'Though this may seem strange to most Australians, there are still some patriarchal cultures who have this practice so that a woman is provided for and a man's genetic line continues.

In that time and culture, a wife was regarded as part of a man's property so we should not hear the text saying, 'Who will she share love with?', but rather 'Who will she belong to?'

Before unpacking the response of Jesus it's helpful to note the past tense used by the Saducees when referring to Moses. They began by saying, 'Moses wrote for us that if a

man's brother dies...' They did not say, 'What Moses writes for us if a man's brother dies...'
The Saducees were sticklers for a literal reading of Jewish writing and law – The Torah – what we know today as the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

In his response Jesus draws from the well-known encounter between God and Moses described beautifully in the third chapter of Exodus (Exodus 3:4-6). In this a bush appeared to be burning and when Moses approached it he was directed to take off his shoes because he was standing on Holy Ground. Jesus reminded the Saducees that what Moses then heard was God saying in the present tense, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' God is not remembered saying, 'I was the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...'

In using the present tense Jesus affirmed for his listeners, both then and now, that he believed in a continuing life and identity after physical death, and that this would be with God. But he also affirmed that this continuing life and identity will be different to the life we know now. He said, '*Those who belong to this age marry, and are give in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place on that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. They cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God...*' (Lk 20:34-36).

This would have been confronting both for the Saducees who didn't believe in resurrection, and for the Pharisees who did. The Pharisees would have found it confronting because Jesus didn't limit resurrection to God's chosen people of Israel, but instead spoke of resurrection for those who are 'children of God...' Clearly this is a much bigger group of people and I wonder who we think of as being '*children of God*'?

Do we think that '*the children of God*' are just those who belong to a Christian Church – Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Greek-Orthodox, Pentecostal etc., or could '*the children of God*' include more people? Do we think that '*the children of God*' are those who share a particular interpretation of the Bible, or could it include people who have diverse understandings about Biblical text? And, perhaps more controversially, do we think that the term is limited only to those who are Christian, or could '*the children of God*' include people of all faiths and none??

If you are hoping that I'm going to conclude with a clear sense of what I think will happen after we die... I am going to disappoint you! The truth is I don't know, and I'm wary of people who categorically say that they do. I'm hugely challenged by the teaching of Jesus described in the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel which describes a future

judgement based on the way that we've treated people who have had different kinds of need: hungry people, thirsty people, new people, homeless people, sick people, and those who have been imprisoned... At the same time as being encouraged and reassured by other portions of Scripture that suggest God's love, mercy, and grace is more than you and I can understand.

What I would like to affirm as I conclude, is that I believe life is an extraordinary gift from God, and that God loves all people, and calls us to love others... even the ones we struggle to love. Perhaps, especially those! And that, through faith in Christ, we've got plenty to get on with in this life, trusting that whatever happens next, God will take care of us.

Would you please join me in prayer...

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and for your love. In your grace help us to live with mystery and questions, trusting that in you we find identity, meaning, and purpose. We ask this in the name of the one who calls us to live with love, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.