

PENTECOST 24 (C) – WESLEY, 9.00 & 10.30 11/11/07

The Sadducees were being too clever by half! In trying to trick Jesus, they asked the wrong question.

The Sadducees were a group of people associated with the priests and were more upper class than the Pharisees. They were also very conservative, holding only to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, believed to have been written by Moses. Unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in resurrection because they hadn't seen it spelt out as such in the Torah.

The question they asked sounds ridiculous but was an extreme example of the application of levirate law. In that law, if a man were to die without children, his brother was expected to marry the widow and have a child who would be classed as the dead man's child. This law achieved a couple of things. Firstly it ensured succession of property and title. Secondly it provided for the widow in a society with no government social services.

Now, if Jesus had answered in such a way as to suppose that after death and resurrection the woman had more than one husband at the same time, that would be saying that she was going against the law by committing polyandry.

Jesus replies that there is no marriage after resurrection. He spells it out quite clearly. After resurrection a person is immortal. Therefore, there is no need to have children and so there is no need for marriage. In recounting this story, Luke was following the tradition that marriage was only for procreation and the continuity of the family. You will be glad to know that elsewhere in the Bible, marriage is allowed to be a richer and more fulfilling institution than for procreation alone. But that is irrelevant to Jesus' reply to the Sadducees.

Jesus also said that in the resurrection, human relationships are at a different level to those on earth. We are accustomed to moving from one stage of life to another. We leave childhood behind and on to adulthood. There is work, marriage and parenthood for many, changing levels of responsibility and so on. We can never fully know what another stage of life is going to be like until we are there. And so it will be after death and resurrection. The big difference is that we have no one to tell us what it might be like. When we are children we know adults, as middle aged people we know some elderly but we never get to talk to those who have died. So people have always been curious about what it will be like and many have made guesses. What Jesus said was that it would be different to anything we know before death.

More than that, Jesus said, God is the God of the living not the dead. At first hearing that sounds a bit hard. But Jesus then goes on to point out to the Sadducees that Moses had known about resurrection because Moses had spoken of God as being God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – not in the past tense but as though they were present in Moses' time. Therefore, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were alive to God, generations after their earthly deaths. So, when Jesus says that God is God of the living and not of the dead, he means

that after resurrection, people are alive to God. And that means that God is with us at each stage of our lives, before and after death, when we have faith.

Of course we don't know what life after death will be like but that is immaterial. The only thing we need to know is that God will be with us. Like the fourteenth century mystic, Julian of Norwich, we can know that "all will be well".

Julian was a nun who moved out of the monastic community to live alone in a small cell attached to the church of St Julian in Norwich, England. In 1373 she was 30 years old. During an illness in which she almost died, she had a series of 15 visions of the Passion of Christ. After she recovered, she contemplated the meaning of those visions (or showings as she called them) for the next 20 years or so before writing down what she had learnt about God and Jesus. She was famous in her time for giving wise counsel to people who travelled to Norwich to consult her. She is regarded even today as one of the greatest Christian mystics. The times in which she lived were troubled ones with the black-death and civil unrest but she was optimistic in her theological views, seeing the love of God as being the most important thing. In God's love, she believed, we have everlasting life.

When considering sin in the world and the problems it causes she said how Jesus told her "It is true that sin is the cause of all this pain, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well". What a wonderful promise!

The Old Testament reading we had this morning was from the book of Haggai. Like Julian, he too was talking to people in difficult times. A small number of the exiles had returned from Babylon and were struggling to exist in their homeland, which had been largely destroyed. Haggai convinced the people to give time to their religious duty and to rebuild the Temple as the heart of the community in Jerusalem. Evidently, some people were complaining that the temple would not be as splendid as the one built by Solomon but Haggai had faith that God would provide all the riches that were necessary. He believed that the well being of a society rests upon its concern for spiritual values and its fidelity to the moral order. If those are right then all else will be right.

What is coming out of these Bible readings is that each stage of our lives has to be lived in the love of God. There is a time in each person's life when we realise that God is with us and that we want to respond to that love with our love for God. That time, whether it comes suddenly or whether it creeps up on us, marks a change in our lives. From then on God is a part of our conscious lives and other people can see a difference in us. That difference does not mean that we have to be terribly serious or sanctimonious.

In the recent book study of the biography of William Wilberforce we learnt how, as a student, he had been a real party person. After his conversion he thought that he had to be serious and not go to parties. That lasted a little while until he realised that God did not mean him to miss out on enjoyment. The difference his conversion meant was that he was no longer self-centred and certainly not

dissolute. And then of course he allowed God's love to work through him to convince the parliament to abolish the slave trade.

But great things are not done alone. Every great leader is part of a team of people. For Christians, the most important team is the church. When people worship together, teach and act together, then God can work wonders.

Rohan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, says "to be in the church is to be in the middle of that divine life, which Jesus uncovers for us ... the threefold rhythm of love, - Father, Son and Spirit" (p136) He speaks of the life of action and love that Jesus modelled for us and that, at its best, the church shows us heaven. He tells an old story about the conversion of the first Russian Christians in the tenth century. The Grand Duke of Kiev had sent envoys to various countries to examine local religion. When they arrived at Constantinople, they attended a service in the cathedral and it was so wonderful that they did not know whether they were in heaven or on earth. And so the Christian faith was taken back to Russia because the cathedral in Constantinople seemed like a bit of heaven.

Imagine if we could all show the love of God so much that our churches seemed like heaven to any visitors. And yet it can happen. God is the God of the living and is with us now. When Christians acknowledge that God is with them and live their lives in partnership with God then wonderful things happen. A little bit of heaven is there for all to see and feel. Think of the difference it has made in Australia when people of faith have acted. Where would medical services to remote areas be without the Rev John Flynn first being inspired to use the talents of early radio buffs and pilots of tiny planes to take doctors and nurses to those in need? Where would the people living today in remote areas be without the support of the patrol padres?

Then there are the needy in the cities - think of the work being done by the numerous church based missions and other social services. Individual Christians coming together to achieve great things.

Ordinary lives become extraordinary when God is a full partner in our lives. Then we know that all of God's creation is sacred. There is no waiting for an afterlife for the good things of God. God is with us now and we are with God and all creation. We care for all creation because it is of God. We care for each other because we are, each one of us, children of God. Our lives have a purpose and we are responsible for making sure that we live up to that purpose. We are also confident that the love of God does not stop at our death. In the resurrection, we continue to live in God's love. We and those who have gone before us and those who will come after us can all live in the love of God.

Living in the love of God means that God is with us at every stage of life. Death is yet another stage and, while we don't know what resurrection life will be like, we do know that God will be with us and that that life will be richer than anything before.

So we can have confidence in the same way that Julian of Norwich did, that 'all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well'.

Amen.