

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

3 before Advent C/Remembrance Sunday

2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-17

Luke 20.27-38

The life of the Resurrection

I don't know how permissible it is to call any part of the Gospel *particularly* precious, but if it is allowed, surely the passage we've just heard is one which is. Because in it we heard in his own words (and I have no doubt that they *are* his own words), our Saviour's account of the life to come.

Later in the Gospel narrative we hear accounts of people meeting Jesus when he had already entered into the life of the resurrection; in the Epistles of Paul we find reflection on that extraordinary 'first-fruits' resurrection of Christ, and what it means for our own hopes. But here – in Luke, and very similarly in Matthew – we find the earthly Jesus, before his death and the events which followed, teaching what the life to come *is*, and what it is not.

Many of you will know, of course, that the subject of life after death was a matter of hot controversy within the Jewish community of Jesus' day. The Sadducee party – the group largely made up of the priests at the Temple – didn't believe in it. It wasn't to be found, they said, in the Torah, the five books of Moses, their holiest scriptures. And like the Christian Puritans of later centuries, they said that if a theological idea wasn't in the Scriptures, then it had no truth at all. For them, a man's life beyond this one would be found solely in the progeny he left behind – solely, that is, in the contribution he made to the continuation of the nation.

For the Pharisees, a more modernising party of religious teachers, the hope of resurrection was a vital component of faith. They found teaching to support it in the prophets and psalms. They believed that only a resurrection of the just would vindicate the suffering so many just and pious Jews had undergone in defence of their faith. Believing in the Resurrection was, for them, part of believing in the righteousness of God.

The controversy was heated, and as in so many heated debates, one side liked to parody the other to make jokes out of its beliefs.

And so we heard the Saducees' little joke this morning. The story of the wretched woman, married off to one brother after another, no less than seven times – in order to fulfil the ancient law of Levirate marriage. 'And then she dies, perhaps she's exhausted after all these marriages and all these bereavements, and - now comes the good bit! – she's going to be in a predicament, isn't she, on resurrection day, (if there is such a thing)? Seven husbands! (Ho, ho, ho!) All of them standing there, fresh up from their graves. She's a pious Jewish woman, and can't belong to more than one of them. What are they going to do, then, these resuscitated corpses? Have a fisticuffs over her? (Ha, ha, ha!) Not very edifying, is it, this idea of us all being resurrected, if that's the kind of thing that it will lead to...?

You see, the Saducees had decided that this upstart Jesus was some kind of maverick Pharisee. And they could make him look stupid with this little joke of theirs, which always made the Pharisees' faith in resurrection look so foolish.

And in a way they were right. Jesus was to some extent more like the Pharisees than the Saducees. He did believe in a life beyond this one – 'the resurrection', he called it, as the Pharisees did.

But what he believed and taught was not what the Pharisees believed and taught. In Matthew's Gospel, when we read of

this incident, we read that Jesus burst out, 'You're quite wrong!'

And by 'you' he meant 'All of you!- Saducees and Pharisees alike.' The Saducees were wrong to have no hope of a life to come, other than continuance of the family name through offspring. The Pharisees were wrong to picture the life to come as a kind of resuscitation at the end of the age. (For good measure, Jesus could have thrown in that the Greeks were wrong, too – the ones who believed that the soul is immortal by nature, and is simply bound to continue on, regardless of whether God wills it, or has anything at all to do with it.)

Jesus clearly taught that there is a resurrection life – that is, a fulfilled and eternal life which comes not automatically, because it is the quality of the soul to be immortal, but as a free gift of God. Poetically, Christ described it as like the life of the angels. It's a life not bounded by time. The dead are not dead and waiting, while the present age unfolds along a linear time-scale; they are finding their resurrection in the eternal and ever-present reality of God. And – if they are alive to God, then they are alive, too, to those who come close to God as they continue on this earth.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus trumped both Saducee and Pharisee – and he did it with breathtaking adroitness, underscoring his teaching with a text from the Torah – those very books that the Saducees said contained no teaching about the life to come – but he also used that text radically to challenge the Pharisees’ idea of what Resurrection meant: ‘The fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.’

We may find our Lord’s way of arguing rather strange. But we can leave that little bit of puzzlement on one side, if we let ourselves just grasped by the glorious truth at the heart of what he’s teaching: those we have committed to him in faith are alive in and with God, in a new life – the life of resurrection. And if they are with God, then – since he is everywhere – they are never far from us.

Sudden loss and profound grief – the sense of emptiness which is horribly natural to bereavement - sometimes drives people to go looking for their loved-ones in unhealthy and misleading ways. After the slaughter of the First World War - so many young lives cut short, and so many hopes denied to parents, wives, sweethearts and children who lived-on –

there was a great surge in spiritualism. People hoped in séances to find the reassurance they craved that the horror of the trenches hadn’t been the final end of those they loved – and that those loved-ones cared for them still, and spoke from the after- life. Some of the people who turned to spiritualism no doubt found a measure of comfort, but it was a deceptive comfort, falling far short of the glorious message of resurrection that comes to us both from Jesus’ teaching, and from the experience of those who have trusted in the Risen One throughout the ages.

Spiritualism so often battens on to the limited concerns and imaginings of our earthly experience. It makes it sound as though ‘the other side’ is merely a continuation of this world and nothing has really changed. Spiritualism doesn’t put God at the centre. It doesn’t give the mind-stretching hope hinted at in Jesus’ words ‘ they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection’. Paul put it another way:: ‘no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him...’ (I Cor.2.9)

Perhaps the hope that Jesus gives is too challenging. Because it is, after all, the hope of a life in which the exclusive ties of this life are no more. ‘The dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.’ In seeking comfort we so often want to be

assured that the most intimate and precious relationships of our life aren't broken, but are eternal and continue exclusive.

What are we to say? That the dead who are alive to God love their families, their spouses any less than they did on earth? Surely not! But perhaps the mind-blowing truth is that the angelic life of the resurrection is one in which the intensity of love we have known for *some* in this world will extend, and become the same intensity of love for all, within the communion of saints. The natural human relationships which have mattered so much, and taught us so much in this life, will be looked on in that state as the schools in which we learnt a love which was destined finally to become totally inclusive.

Left behind on this earth, we baulk at the thought that we might no longer be exclusively the centre of our loved-ones affections. In this world, exclusivity is necessary to protect depth of love, just as the firm banks of a river maintain its depth. But in the life of the resurrection, love will be so overwhelming and infinite, that it can overtop all boundaries without becoming any the shallower.

So, our loved-ones, alive in God, love us still, just as much as ever – if not more. We can come close to them simply by coming close to God. We don't need to summon them and

the assurance of their love in any more forced way than through trusting prayer and communion..

But their love for us doesn't tie us to an endless exclusive loyalty to them – the widow, or widower, for example, may marry again without distress to the one who has gone before. And the intense and universal love within the communion of saints gives us a vision of a love which, even on this earth should aspire to be more universal. Nation, tribe and state, for example, count for nothing within the community of those whose love derives its heart from God. If we could grow closer to a universal love like that, even within this life, how much nearer would we become to being peacemakers here!

In a little while we shall remember those who have died in war – both the Two World Wars, and all the conflicts since, including the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We shall stand in mourning, in repentance, in thanksgiving, in hope and in resolution. We may read the names that we see on the memorial as we stand in silence; let us reflect that those people are alive to God, even if they seem so dead to us. And let us pray that more and more, even on this earth, we may enter into the kind of love which animates those who are in God's presence now. And that moved by that

love, we may have firm hope, and bring hope others in our
turn..