

REFLECTIONS FOR THE 32ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 06 November 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

We are coming close to the end of the Church's liturgical year – the third Sunday from today is the first Sunday of Advent. It is not surprising then that today's readings explore the question, "Is there life after death?"

While today we Christians take life after death for granted, even up to the time of Jesus, there were differences of opinion on whether there was life after death. Indeed, for us today, we have diverse views of what life after death looks like – we have imagined a place called heaven, but each one of us has a different image of what heaven looks like. We tend to imagine those things which give us most joy, and we then conclude that heaven is the place where these are fully present. You have heard me say that I do not want to go to heaven unless I can sleep until noon every day and then sit on a loud reading my murder stories for the rest of the day! While your desires may be more sublime than mine, we tend to take the same approach. What we all hold in common is the belief that, once again, we will see our loved ones face to face.

Today's readings caution us to trust that there is life after death but to be less certain about what that might look like. The first reading and the Gospel are bookends, both imagining some dimensions of life after death. The psalm and reading from 2 Thessalonians reflect more on how we prepare ourselves for this moment in our life story.

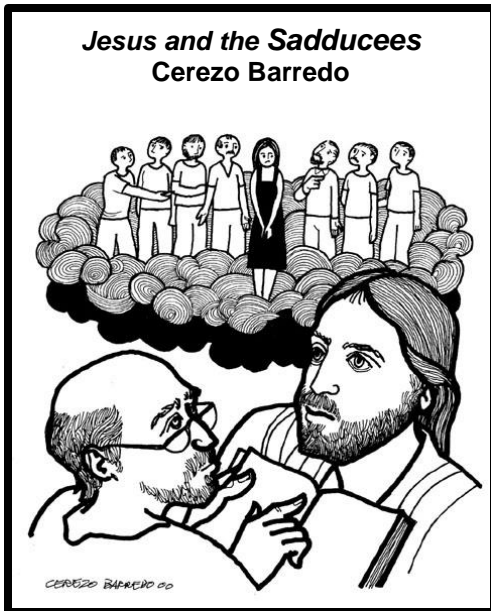
In the first reading from 2 Maccabees, we hear parts of the horrific story of a mother and her seven sons who were tortured and then martyred by order of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus was a Greek Hellenistic King who ruled the Seleucid Empire (including Judah and Samaria) from 175 BCE until his death in 164 BCE. He issued decrees forbidding many traditional Jewish practices and began a campaign of persecution against devout Jews that led eventually to the Maccabean Revolt. In today's story, the mother and her sons are being cruelly punished for refusing to eat pork that is deemed to be unclean and therefore forbidden by their Jewish religion. Our reading today does not include the following verses which are important to understand the reasoning of the sons and the teaching of their mother:

The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honourable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore, **the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in mercy give life and breath back to you** again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of the laws."

2 Mac 7:20-23



The sons' faithfulness to Torah was repeated by each one before he was martyred as it was here by their mother before she herself is killed. She places their death in the context of creation and of God's creating care for each one, "The Creator of the world will in mercy give life and breath back to you again." This teaching comes at a time when there was not a unanimous belief among the people of Judah that there was life after death. It is one of the few times in the Old Testament that this belief is mentioned with such authority and conviction.



By the time of Jesus, as recorded in Luke's Gospel today, the Pharisees fully believed in resurrection from the dead but the other group of religious leaders, the Sadducees, did not. The Sadducees wanted to trap Jesus by misusing one of the laws to point out an impossible situation if you believed in resurrection. They speak about the woman who has successively married seven brothers in accordance with the Mosaic rule of levirate marriage as prescribed by Deut 25:5.

Jesus avoids this argument saying, "Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection" (Lk 20:35-36). One pastor, Karoline Lewis, says of this comment, "The Kingdom of God has something more in mind than the patriarchy that imprisons women now. No, women will not continue to be

property. Women will not continue to be owned. Women will not continue to be passive in their place in society."

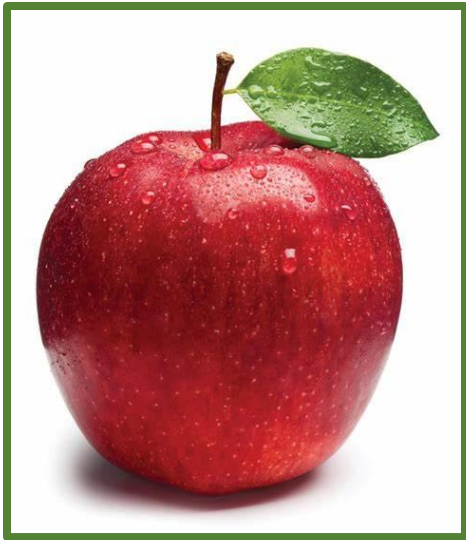
Jesus goes on to say, "The fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive" (Lk 20:37-38). We have no idea what life after death will look like – it is transformation beyond our present imagination. But we know with certainty that the God who calls us into life and into relationship continues in relationship with us beyond death into whatever new life will mean. For God, the relationship that began with creation never ends.

Elizabeth Johnson csj adds something of what that means for our relationships with those whom we love but who have died, "Hoping against hope, we affirm that they [our loved ones who have died] have fallen not into nothingness but into the embrace of the living God. And that is where we can find them again; when we open our hearts to the silent calmness of God's own life in which we dwell, not by selfishly calling them back to where we are, but by descending into the depth of our own hearts where God also abides."

Ron Rolheiser omi describes "heaven" in a most poignant but beautifully expressed way:

In the Gospels, Galilee is the place where, for the most part, the good things happen. It's the place where the disciples first meet Jesus, where they fall in love with him, where they commit themselves to him, and where miracles happen. Galilee is the place where Jesus invites us to walk on water. Galilee is the place where the disciples' souls enlarge and thrive.

And that is also a place for each of our deceased loved ones. In each of their lives, there was a Galilee, a place where their persons and souls were most alive, where their lives radiated the energy and exuberance of the divine. When we look at the life of a loved one who has died we need to ask: Where was she most alive? What qualities did she, most-uniquely, embody and bring into a room? Where did she lift my spirit and make me want to be a better person? Name those things, and you will have named your loved one's Galilee – and you will also have named the Galilee of the Gospels, namely, that place in the heart where Jesus invites you to meet him. And that is too where you will meet your loved ones in the communion of saints. Don't look for a live person in a cemetery. She's not there. She's in Galilee. Meet her there.



Psalms 17 gives us the sense of hope and confidence in our lives today which becomes even more real after our death, "Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness" (Ps 17:8, 15). The writer of 2 Thessalonians echoes this confidence which endorses our belief that "God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive" by pouring out this blessing upon us, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word. . . May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ" (2 Thess 2:16-17, 3:5).

Last week we celebrated the feasts of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. This coming Friday we celebrate Remembrance Day. In the embrace of those wonderful moments of synchronicity, God's surprises, today's readings help us understand that we find those who have died "by descending into the depth of our own hearts where God also abides." This sense of the connection in love between us and those who have gone before us is echoed in this prayer-poem by Jan Richardson:

When the wall between the worlds
is too firm, too close.
When it seems all solidity and sharp edges.
When every morning you wake
as if flattened against it,
its forbidding presence
fairly pressing the breath
from you all over again.
Then may you be given a glimpse
of how weak the wall
and how strong what stirs on the other side,
breathing with you and blessing you
still forever bound to you
but freeing you into this living, into this world
so much wider than you ever knew.

