

32nd Sunday Year C

Fr Peter Groves

2 Maccabees 7

Luke 20:27-38

Philosophers like to remind people that there are different sorts of possibility. Plenty of things which seem to us impossible by any ordinary sense of the word are not absolutely impossible, or, as they would say, not logically impossible. There is nothing intrinsically self-contradictory about, for example, the notion of me levitating three feet above the pulpit as I speak to you. As it happens, such an event is physically impossible as far as we know, but it's not logically impossible, it's not self-contradictory. And the fact that lots of very bizarre things are indeed logically possible allows for a lot of very strange sounding thought experiments. In philosophy, these might concern mad scientists swapping people's brains, or a monster who gets more benefit from any given state of affairs than anyone else, and so on and so forth. In any intellectual sphere, these thought experiments can make for some very creative further thought, but it's fair to say that when one is asked for the umpteenth time by the fervent undergraduate whether or not what one has just said applies

to someone who lives on his own on the moon, one has to fight back the words “What a silly question.”

The text for this sermon really ought to be “Ask a silly question...” for it’s just such a question that Jesus is asked this morning. The Sadducees want to know his view on the case of a woman who has been married seven times, to each of seven brothers. Whose wife will she be in heaven? they ask. And of course that’s just daft. Our first reading from Second Maccabees gave us a slightly sanitised version of the tortures undergone by the righteous Jews whose reward for suffering is the glory of heaven. One might ask whether those traditional violent torments were actually in themselves worse than the hardship undergone by our unfortunate widow, since seven husbands sounds like a definition of hell by anyone’s standards.

The books of Maccabees recall the deeds of the tribe in their title. The Maccabees were sons of a priest who led opposition to the introduction of pagan cults in Jerusalem and Judah, and eventually succeeded in purifying the temple and rekindling the light of the Lord’s presence. Their struggles date to the 160s BC, and the books which recount their stories were composed shortly afterwards. They reflect a growing hope in the power of God to raise his chosen to life even after

they have died an earthly death, and in so doing, they provide an important context to the debates concerning resurrection which are naturally central to much New Testament theology.

Much of the Old Testament seems to know nothing of a notion of resurrection. Earlier in his gospel Luke has used the Greek word Hades, the word which is used in the Greek Old Testament to translate Sheol, and whose connotations in Greek thought have close parallels with the Jewish kingdom of the dead. The shade of Samuel, you might remember, is recalled from Sheol by the Witch of Endor to prophesy the coming death of Saul. But Sheol, the place of the dead, is not somewhere in which God can be present or from which he can be praised, according to the psalmist, a place of no work or thought or wisdom or knowledge according to the preacher of Ecclesiastes. However, the later we get in Biblical chronology, the more often we find hints that there might be, to put it crudely, a way back. The underworld comes to be thought of as a place which is divided, with the righteous in one quarter looking forward to new life.

In Jesus's time, opinions were mixed. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that the Pharisees believed in an immortal soul, and in retributive punishment for the wicked after death. In the Acts of the

Apostles, Paul - himself a Pharisee - appeals to his own tradition when claiming that he is being persecuted for his belief in the resurrection. Luke, narrating, slips in the fact that the Sadducees deny angel, spirit and resurrection, but Pharisees accept all three. So the author of Acts, also the author of this morning's gospel, is being careful to distinguish the negative views of the Sadducees on the subject of resurrection from their sectarian opponents.

So the context for the Sadducees question is one of doctrinal conflict. Whose side are you on?, they are saying to Jesus. And, with carefully constructed rhetoric, they frame a question for Jesus which they think will show any position other than their own to be utterly absurd. They are not expecting such an efficient answer, nor such an unequivocal statement of belief in resurrection. As far as God is concerned, all are alive. He is the God not of the dead but of the living. Those who live no longer on earth are akin to angels, since they are sons of the resurrection. He almost says, What a silly question. Those around him seem to recognise the point, since we're told that from this point on no-one dared question him further.

It's worth recalling that this little dispute comes immediately after another. We are told that the scribes and the chief priests sent spies to

entrap Jesus, and they attempt to do so with a question about taxes: should we pay the emperor or not. Jesus' response – render to Caesar those things which are Caesar's, and to God those things which are God's – is not an affirmation of a divided, secular world in which some things are the business of God and some are not. Rather it is a rejection of the absurd notion that one might believe in a transcendent creator God, and think that there are aspects of his creation with which he is unconnected. The same point is being made in the response to the Sadducees. Jesus is clear – he is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. He is not the God of the dead, not because there is some large class of creation called “the dead” over whom God has no sovereignty. Rather, he is not the God of the dead, because they are not dead, because this life is not all there is. God is god of those we call living and those we call dead, because he is God of everything which exists, seen and unseen, visible and invisible as we shall shortly say in the creed.

So Jesus' dispute with his interlocutors is about rather more than Jewish disagreements concerning the afterlife, it is a question about whether or not one is really prepared to believe in God, to live by faith in one who cannot be compacted into the spaces of our limited imaginations or compressed by the box ticking legalism which stifles

human love. Faith in the God of Jesus Christ is faith beyond any thought experiment we can concoct, because it demands that we both acknowledge our human limitations and also hope in that which transcends and exceeds them, the resurrection hope which speaks to us of the endless and unbounded nature of God's creative love. The Jerusalem authorities comes to Jesus for a contest of wit and words, and are sent away with their tails between their legs. But they are only truly defeated when the love of which he speaks is poured out for and before them in the days and the drama which will follow. The question which greets the women at the tomb is a question for us all "Why do you seek the living, among the dead?"