

Sunday November 19th, 2010
Remembrance Day

PRAYER: O God, be mindful of your covenant with us, and we will be mindful of the wonders you work among us-the wonder of your forgiveness, being anxious to reconcile; the wonder of your patience, being slow to anger; the wonder of your mercy, being abundant in love; the wonder of your faithfulness, being loath to forsake us. O God; make yourself known to us, and we shall all be changed into your likeness as we behold your glory.

STEWARDSHIP: In considering the wonderful gifts of grace God has bestowed on us, we might wonder if there is anything, we can do to repay his kindness. This is the same sentiment that the Psalmist wrote about when he said, "How can I repay the Lord for all his gifts to me?" The answer the psalmist arrived at should also direct our path, when he continues on and says, "I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people." Let us therefore follow the psalmist's example and offer to God those gifts we promised to him, as a way of honouring his love for us. (Psalm 116:12, 14)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Holy Spirit, you are the voice that will never fail to sing, though the world be silent; you are the foot that will never fail to dance, though the entire world be still. You are the eye that will never fail to watch, though the entire world is sleeping; you are the mind that never fails to reason, though the whole world is senseless. O Spirit of God, you are the hand that will never fail to open, though the world is selfish; you are the heart that will never fail to feel, though the world is numb.

Thank you, Precious Spirit, for abiding in our midst, for moving us when we do not want to move and for slowing us down when we do not want to stop. Thank you for moving in ways that, though mysterious, do not frighten us away. We are a people often made small by the greatness of our fear. We shrink from conflict when conflict cries out for resolution. We flee from truth when truth demands expression. We run from change when change must come: change that will require us to be no longer who we have been, to do no longer as we have done, to say no longer what we have said, to believe no longer as we have believed.

O Comforter, remain among us, and we will rise above our fear. Instead of shrinking from conflict, we will join it until it is justly resolved. Instead of fleeing from truth, we will pursue it until it is freely expressed. Instead of running from change, we will weigh it until it is fairly judged.

O Spirit, abide among us, and we will rise above all fear. We will become your voice, and though all else be silent, we will never cease to sing your song. We will become your feet, and though all else be still, we will never cease to dance your dance. We will become your eyes, and though all else be sleeping, we will never cease to keep your watch. We will become your mind, and though all else be senseless, we will never cease to seek your will. We will become your hands, and though all else be selfish, we will never cease to share your riches. We will become your heart, and though all else be numb, we will never fail to love your world.

BENEDICTION: Let us live to God, remembering that we are children of the resurrection. Let us render true judgments, showing kindness and mercy, that the saving word of the Lord might triumph over all malice and every cruelty, in this world as in the next. Amen.

Sunday November 19th, 2010
Remembrance Day

Luke 20:27-38
“They are sad; you see”

The story goes that there was a couple who had been married for well over fifty years. They lived in a rundown farm house and were able, between them, to eke out a living doing marginal amounts of farming. Perhaps it was the stress of their marginal existence, or maybe they just had grown tired of each other, but their relationship had deteriorated over the years. They had taken to being cold and very hostile to each other, but what choice did they have but to stick it out.

One day at breakfast, the wife suddenly keeled over into her porridge and died. The husband immediately called the local undertaker to come to the farm house and collect the body. As the two men from the funeral home were making their way out of the house, one of the men tripped over a rose bush in the front garden, thereby dropping the coffin containing the body. The coffin went down with a tremendous crash, and the lid popped open; where upon the wife sat up, right as rain.

It would seem that the jolt had somehow brought her back to the land of the living. Life returned to the unsteady rhythm that the couple had developed, and for three long years their heated relationship ventured on. Then one morning, the wife keeled over again and once again died. Once again, the undertaker was called to collect the body. As the two men were carrying out the coffin for the second time in three years, the old man was heard to say just one parting sentence. “For goodness sake, watch out for that rose bush!”

“Until death do us part”. These familiar words used to be a regular part of every Christian wedding service. It was a vow people took seriously, even living in difficult relationships, because they had made a promise. In fact, I remember a very funny scene from the old “Night Court” sitcom, in which a very elderly couple was brought in before the judge. They had been arrested for disturbing the peace, with their constant loud bickering and throwing of objects at each other.

The judge asked them how long they had been married. They replied venomously, “Sixty Years.” “Well, if you hate each other so much, why in the world do you stay together?” the judge asked. They replied, “We are waiting for the children to die.” I do hope for your own mental health, your marriage is a better experience than sitting around waiting for the other person to die.

On the other side of the marriage coin is the oft repeated sentiment that couples express to each other, that they will “love each other forever”. Hidden within this sentiment is the idea that somehow, in heaven, we will be coupled for eternity. In fact, Mormon believers have taken this erroneous view further, by holding special marriage ceremonies here on earth, that is supposed to join people in marriage in heaven for eternity.

Marriage seems then to be a focus of a lot of speculation in regards to what happens to this relationship at death; even though our marriage vows clearly state that the link is severed in death.

Sunday November 19th, 2010
Remembrance Day

The Christian view, taken from this passage in Luke and others, is that marriage is an earthly institution that has no place in heaven. In heaven we will neither be married, or seeking to be married to someone, whether our current spouse or someone new. Some of you may be breathing a sigh of relief over this one, and maybe some of you are saddened by this news.

This confusion over what happens to relationships we enjoy on earth when we die, has been around for a very long time. In particular, today's passage introduces us to a group of Jewish theologians, who use this confusion, to press their main objective. The Sadducees, like the Pharisees and Essenes, were a group of religious scholars, who came from elite families of the priestly cast.

Sadducees, like the Pharisees, were members of the Sanhedrin, and had considerable influence in religious matters before the courts. They too, had grown to despise Jesus because he was gaining an influence among the people; an influence that they were accustomed to enjoying for themselves. So, just like the Pharisees and the Scribes, the Sadducees sought ways to trap Jesus into saying something in order to embarrass or anger the crowds or the Romans.

In today's passage, the Sadducees who had just listened to Jesus deal with the issue of paying taxes, step forward to push their own agenda. In the world of Jewish religion in the first century AD, the Sadducees differed from their contemporaries on at least two major points. Unlike the Pharisees who took great liberties in creating further rules and regulations, which Jesus refers to as a "burden on the people", Sadducees believed that if it wasn't in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the bible) than it wasn't to be followed.

It is hard to imagine this, but in terms of Jewish theology, the Pharisees were seen by the Sadducees as being liberal, and saw themselves as conservatives. The Sadducees also, unlike the Pharisees, did not believe in the overriding providence of God. In other words, they did not believe God brought about the events in our lives. They believed that whatever happened to you, good or bad, was because of something you have done.

The point of their theology that is before us today is that of the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection and in angels, but the Sadducees rejected both ideas. They believed that when the body died, the soul was dead as well. Their belief stems from the fact that there are few references to life after death in the Old Testament, particularly in the Pentateuch. Not a very hope filled position, is it?

So, to try and discredit Jesus, and further their personal agenda in their dispute with the Pharisees, they come and ask Jesus a theoretical question. In the Law of Moses, which the Sadducees revere, there is provision for what is referred to as Levirate marriage. Mentioned in Genesis 38:8 and Deuteronomy 25:5, as well as referred to in Ruth chapter 4; the law commands that when a man dies leaving his wife childless, his brother is to take the widow as his wife, and raise up children for his deceased brother.

The point being, that the resulting children would be his brothers, not his own.

Sunday November 19th, 2010
Remembrance Day

This is the Law of Moses, the Sadducees would argue, and if this is the word of God, what would happen they asked, if a man died and left his wife childless, and his brother took her for his wife. Then the second brother dies, again leaving no children, and the third brother takes the woman as his wife. Then let us say this scenario goes on for seven brothers, with the woman finally dying herself, without children. I heard one preacher remark that she probably died to get away from this ridiculous family.

Then the Sadducees ask, “Whose wife then shall she be in the resurrection, since she was married to all seven brothers?” First of all, I need to state that this theoretical question is based on an implausible situation. There is no recorded incident of a woman being subjected to seven brothers like this, and by the time Jesus is born, levirate marriage has actually faded from common usage.

I need to point out to you that the Sadducees must have felt pretty smug at this moment. From their theological position they thought this little scenario proved their point. In fact, this was probably a scenario they used in debates with the Pharisees on the subject of the resurrection. To prove this, I direct you to an incredible moment in the Apostle Paul’s life recorded in Acts 23:6-8. In this passage Paul is on trial for preaching about Jesus.

In the midst of the trial, Luke records these words, “Paul realized that some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, so he shouted, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, so were all my ancestors! And I am on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead!” Luke states simply, “This divided the council-the Pharisees against the Sadducees.”

In the subsequent clamour that arose, Paul had to be literally taken by force out of the council chamber, lest he be torn apart by the disputing factions. So perhaps we need to ask, who was this question really directed at; Jesus or the Pharisees? The issue the Sadducees are raising isn’t about marriage, it is about authority, and where one derives one’s theological views. So, Jesus does two things in his response.

The first thing he does is that he corrects their misperception about the resurrection, especially as it pertains to marriage. Bottom line; there is no marriage in heaven. But the really issue Jesus addresses is the false idea that there is no proof of the resurrection in the Pentateuch, or the words of Moses. So, Jesus refers the Sadducees to Exodus 3:6, when Moses is standing in front of the burning bush that was not consumed by the flame.

It is a sacred moment for Jewish believers. It is at the very heart of their identity as God’s people. The Sadducees knew this story intimately, as did the people in the crowd. Moses recorded his experience at the burning bush by referring to God as the “God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” These words are the familiar and revered expression of God’s identification with the patriarchs of the faith.

Jesus makes the point, that God refers to himself this way, and no Sadducees would argue against the validity of these words being from God directly.

Sunday November 19th, 2010
Remembrance Day

What is the significance then of God referring to himself as the God of these men who had long since died? It means clearly that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still in a relationship with God. This is true, Jesus says, because God is a God of the living, not the dead. Jesus adds, "They are all alive to him." What Jesus is saying in this strategy of his, is that the Sadducees cannot have it both ways.

They cannot, on the one hand quote Moses on the subject of levirate marriage, and on the other hand, ignore the word of Moses that proves there is a resurrection. The Pharisees who were listening to this response to a question they had heard hundreds of times, replied, "Well, said, Teacher!" You can almost picture them as the ones now gloating.

I wonder how often Jesus' own proof of the resurrection was subsequently quoted in the heated debates the high council had frequently. Unfortunately, as we read in the book of Acts, the Sadducees had not changed their position on the resurrection. In fact, in Acts chapter 4 they get quite hostile towards the early church, primarily because it was teaching that Jesus had risen from the dead.

This whole twentieth chapter of Luke begins with the religious leaders, Sadducees, priests, Pharisees, Scribes and others challenging Jesus' authority. All though this chapter, Jesus is raising the same issue; the religious leaders the people are following are inconsistent. Their desire to be authoritative was marred by hypocrisy. They read the word of God and interpret it to fit their own preconceived ideas, or to promote their personal agenda.

The Pharisees, for their part, create new laws burdening the people in order to make themselves look good compared to others. Jesus is stating to the crowd that one of the most important choice we make in life, is the authority we submit to. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." If we want to approach God, in this life or the next then our authority has to be whom; Jesus of course!

In thinking about the critical issues in our lives, who or what do we listen to in forming our ideas, our theology, and our life's philosophy? Are we consistent in following our authority? The example in question has to do with marriage and what happens to that relationship when we die. Jesus is clear; that in heaven we are neither married nor given in marriage. Marriage is an earthly institution designed to help the human race thrive.

Well maybe for most of us. Sometimes our desire for authority can go a bit awry. Such as an office manager who was complaining in their staff meeting that he wasn't getting any respect. The next day, he attached a small sign to his office door: I'm The Boss! Later that day, he returned from lunch to find that somebody had taped note over his sign. It read, "Your wife called. She wants her sign back."

If our authority is Jesus, then what does that say to us about all the sentimental fluff being espoused by contemporary music, movies, or literature as it relates to marriage or relationships? Are we compromised by condoning ideas that marriage is eternal, or unnecessary or disposable?

Sunday November 19th, 2010
Remembrance Day

Jesus' point is that whatever our final authority in life is, we must be consistent. We cannot take the parts we want, to forward our own agenda, and ignore those that challenge us or critique our life style or life choices.

We cannot claim the hope of the resurrection without accepting our need to be faithful to the one who purchased that hope by going to the cross. Are we consistent in our message to the world and how we view important relationships like our marriages? It is time to see things the way Jesus sees them, for in the end it is only his opinion that truly matters.