

Pentecost 24
11/11/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Haggai 1:15b-2-9

Psalm 145

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

The Sadducees' Question

As a child growing up in a conservative Christian family, it seemed the priority message in the preaching of the church was concerned with life after death. It was core belief, and sometimes holding it mattered more than anything else you did. What it delivered was freedom from the fear that death would separate us from those we love. As I gained understanding it was clear there was more to the faith than this one belief. This is demonstrated in our creeds, which detail many things before they conclude the affirmation of belief in the resurrection with belief in “the life everlasting” or “the life of the world to come”. Many Christians would be reticent about spelling out what this means, and for good reason. It points beyond ourselves to something more, and this is hard to express.

Belief in the resurrection and the life everlasting is an idea that has a history. There are few references to it in the older books of Hebrew scripture but it came to the fore as an explicit belief in the few centuries before Jesus' time. Not everyone agreed that it had a place amongst the articles of faith, but it is central to what Jesus teaches and demonstrates.

At a time when his authority was being challenged, the Sadducees, members of an aristocratic priestly class, came to Jesus with a trick question about the resurrection of the dead. Their own belief was that the soul and the body perished together, that there were no future punishments or rewards for a person, and that angels or spirits did not exist. The Sadducees followed Hebrew Scripture and their question was based on a law in Deuteronomy, (25:5f) which requires that when a married woman's husband dies without child her brother in law should produce children by her to ensure that his name continues in history. As we heard, they gave an extreme example to make the point that such a provision must mean there can be no afterlife.

Jesus makes two points in his reply. Firstly he shows that the revelation of God is not as closed off as the conservative literalism of the Sadducees suggests. The resurrection, which is characteristic of the age to come, is not a continuation of life as we know it or an expanded or idealized version of human aspirations. It is an entirely new, transformed style of life where the old rules don't apply. In the age to come the things we now know, such as marriage and producing children for the future, have no place. They are earthly paradigms that can be discarded. Jesus is saying: the resurrection is life you can hardly imagine, but it grows out of our life before God. He himself, in his life of reversing worldly values, gives us hints of what that means.

In the second point Jesus gives a theological basis for what he says in referring to the story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. When God says "**I am** the

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" – the God of those who came before Moses, Jesus says it implies that because God is the **living God**, the people of old who knew God in their life, while being physically dead, are in some way alive with God. Because God lives, their life with God transcends death, and they are still known to us in God. What is meant here is that God's revelation is not a dead thing related only to Moses. At the burning bush it is made clear that God is an infinitely rich living presence into which the forebears have been gathered.

Jesus shows that Sadducees had not plumbed the full depths of a core story connected with their faith. Their question trivialized the nature of God, and the human relationship with God, and closed off a horizon of faith and life.

Jesus' teaching opened up the horizon. He showed that the hope we have for continuing life with God does not depend on us. It belongs to the very nature of the living God, who from the time of Abraham worked to become our friend. The religious people gathered around Jesus that day were impressed with the integrity of his answer. He had spoken well, and no one dared ask him any more questions.

The point that Jesus makes against the Sadducees is clear and uncomplicated. The hope we have for the life everlasting does not depend on exaggerated imagery, or obscure philosophical theories. Christian hope derives from the very nature of who God is for us. In contrast it impresses me that many people these days have opted for all sorts of alternative views on the afterlife, some of which seem to be highly complex and demanding, and at times load people with burdens of fear and guilt. Lots of people are interested in re-incarnation, others try to find out about their past lives, some are interested in spiritualism and making contact with the dead, and others follow stories of near death experiences with great interest. Humanity obviously has a fascination with this issue, and all sorts of vivid beliefs and images have come to be associated with ideas of the afterlife. However, the perspective Jesus puts forward is quite restrained. There are no details about angels, pearly gates, past lives or future conditions. We cannot find here a street directory for Heaven. Instead there is a straightforward belief that, because God lives, we shall live.

Woody Allen said: "It's not that I am afraid to die, it's just that I don't want to be there when it happens." (*Without Feathers* 1975) It is easy to identify with his awareness of mortality, and his underlying fear of its encroachment into life. Whatever we feel about dying, we will be there when it happens. What Jesus shows us is that we may trust God for our life, and our death, as he did. In the cross he showed us what trust in God is like. And in the resurrection God showed us that Jesus is already a child of the world to come. In him God's future has already become part of our life, and we can have hope. Living by this is a matter of faith and trust. But the Good News is that if we put our hand in the hand of God, in life and in death, God will be there for us when it happens. Thanks be to God.