

## Proper 27, Year C: November 7, 2010

You know, there are just some questions that shouldn't be asked if you really don't want to know the answer.

The Sadducees who approach Jesus don't want an answer – they want to play theological tennis with the question, to throw a question up and bat it around a bit.

Let's cut right to the chase: This is not a text about marriage; it's a question about the resurrection and Jesus' answer seems particularly flat. Like he's having an off day.

Other people got better answers to this resurrection question, but then they were asking from a very different place in life.

To Martha, weeping for her brother, Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life".

To Mary, weeping outside the tomb on Easter Sunday, the answer came in the form of her name spoken from the other side of death.

Ask the question with tears in our eyes, ask it in a hospital room or a nursing home, ask it in those long hours of the night after a difficult verdict has been given and we may hear our own name in answer as well.

But if we ask it, as the Sadducees do, in a comfy, secure, brightly lit religious building where we imagine everything is under control, we get something that sends us away scratching our heads.

The Sadducees were very conservative theologically. They only accepted the first five books of the bible – the ones everyone at the time thought Moses wrote. For the Sadducees that was the extent of the bible. And they were literalists about the bible: since nowhere in those five books is resurrection mentioned – they believed that the resurrection couldn't be real. That's conviction number one.

Conviction number two with which they came to Jesus was that, if there is a heaven, an eternity, a resurrection, then it has to be just like this life. What you see is what we get - for eternity.

So they put together this peculiar, but marginally plausible, story about a woman and seven brothers.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

Because tucked away in the corner of Moses' law, in Deuteronomy 25:5-6, is the idea that if a man died childless it was up to his brothers to create children with his widow.

Now, all the evidence suggests that this law wasn't even practiced in Jesus' day. But here's a nice little theological conundrum the Sadducees can pose. Maybe they even think it's funny. It's a ludicrous situation - designed to show everyone who was listening to them that a halfway intelligent God couldn't dream up something like eternal life if it could result in a mess like this.

It didn't strike Jesus as funny.

As so often, Jesus' response is to turn the issue around. The Sadducees have been evaluating eternal life on the basis of earthly life. He tells them that all those social and legal and relational arrangements which can be so good and necessary and wonderful here, remain here. The structures of "this age" will be superfluous in "that age - in the resurrection of the dead".

So is eternal life so absolutely different that we can't do anything to get ready?

Not quite.

It is a journey that we will all face.

It is a journey for which we can prepare – although we are often reluctant to do so.

The point, of course, is that death is no respecter of age or status.

You know that and I know that but we often live as if we were blissfully ignorant of it.

What can we do?

Here are some really practical suggestions.

Have you got a driver's license? Sign the donor card.

You won't need any part of your body where you're going but someone here might.

It is the last desperate act of human selfishness not to give that gift.

Have you talked to your doctor and your loved ones about what heroic measures if any, are to be taken in event of serious illness?

This is a deeply personal decision, to be made individually, but don't leave it to your kids or your doctor outside the Intensive Care Unit to decide. Think about it. Talk about it.

Pre-arrange your funeral.

Too many times I have heard the plaintive

"we don't know what so-and-so would have wanted".

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

Have you a will and is it up to date?  
Or is your family going to get into a real mess  
because you haven't wanted to think about things ahead of time?  
And don't forget the church while you're at it;  
be sure to figure Christ Episcopal into your estate planning.

Several things you can do. Simple things - most of them.  
Things I'd be willing to help anyone through.  
Please, for the sake of those you love,  
don't leave the preparations for others to make.

But that's only one aspect of the preparations we can make,  
having to do with those things we leave behind.  
What about being prepared for that which is to come?

I'm sure that the Sadducees were convinced  
that they had hard-headed common-sense on their side  
when they rejected the pie in the sky when we die by and by notion of eternal life.  
Better to stand tough and face the harsh truth that this is all there is.

But that is a position of faith just as surely as the one Jesus advances.

Opposite to the view that this is all there is –  
that history is nothing but a row of tombstones - Jesus places another vision.  
He says we'll be transfigured.  
That everything - our life, our relationships, even the very world itself –  
will be changed - as Paul puts it - in a twinkling of an eye..

How will all things be changed? And into what? Neither Jesus, nor Paul, says.

Jesus does say that the transfigured life will be like that of angels -  
but to say it is like something implies it is also unlike.

In the end Jesus settles for saying that we will be the children of God.  
That's based on a few clear ideas.

First, history is going some place. Not just round and round.  
The words of the bible are theological and religious,  
not historical and scientific, but the message is plain:  
there is a beginning, a present, and a consummation, a completion.

And God is more than just a great engineer  
who set it all going and then walked away.  
The clear reason that we were made was to be companions with God.

Are you willing to the companion of God - to go where God wants you to go?  
Are you willing to begin the process of being changed –  
of being transfigured - here and now?

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.  
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

Are you willing to let go of the brief and transitory things of this world for the sake of drawing closer to God?

The Sadducees showed in their question to Jesus that they wanted an eternity as close to earthly life as possible – and of course it is ridiculous.

As ridiculous and unappealing as sitting around on a cloud strumming a harp for all eternity.

Jesus tries to blow the doors off that.

Whatever the resurrection is, it is utterly other than anything we have known. But at its centre is the One we have always known, however dimly.

When John Owen, the great Puritan pastor and teacher, lay dying, he was dictating some last letters to friends. He said to his secretary:

"Write, I am still in the land of the living." Then he stopped and said: "No, change that to read - I am still in the land of those who die, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living."

That is where what is real, what is love, will be lifted into the light and all relationships and all faces will be transfigured for the children of God.

In that transfiguration we will at last become the living.

To be ready for the journey, for that reality - that life – Jesus tells us that all we need to have is faith, and that all we need to do is to try to live by faith.

Are you prepared?