

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME [C]

2 Maccabees 7: 1 - 2, 9 - 14

2 Thessalonians 2: 16 - 3: 5

Luke 20: 27 - 38

“Marriage is for people here on earth. But in the age to come, those worthy of being raised from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage. And they will never die again.”

Lk. 20: 34 - 36

A verse like that, taken at face value, could be understood to put marriage on a lower level than celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

No doubt there are some who would make that interpretation of today’s Gospel, but I think they’re misguided.

Jesus isn’t talking about the merits of celibacy over marriage.

He’s actually making a fundamental point about the resurrection from the dead.

The first reading is barbaric; and I my inclination is to switch off when I hear of these brothers being tortured and ripped apart.

But it’s actually about the resurrection from the dead.

In fact, it’s really a key text in the Old Testament, which speaks specifically about those who are faithful to the Lord in this life, being raised to new life by Him, and with Him, when they die.

Just as the second brother says to his torturers: “You may discharge us from this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again for ever.” 2 Macc. 7: 9

That’s the link between it, and today’s Gospel.

In the Gospel we meet the Sadducees who didn’t believe in any sort of life after death, except that one went down into Sheol.

A shadowland. A place of non-existence. A place of darkness to which all the dead go, and where the life and light of God doesn’t penetrate.

The Sadducees believed that the only form of immortality anyone could know was in the family line being maintained through having children.

So that’s why the Sadducees put to Jesus this convoluted scenario of seven brothers marrying the same woman.

Each one dies; and the survivors in turn marry the widow so that their family line can be carried on.

But at the end of the line the woman dies, having borne none of them any children.

So, to the Sadducees way of thinking, these men are obliterated. Their name won’t live for ever in the sight of the Lord.

Of course it was a hypothetical question to try to trick Jesus into either agreeing with them that the resurrection was nonsense; or to side with the Pharisees who believed in some sort of resurrection.

The Sadducees, and the Pharisees were vying for power in the religious, and political life in Israel at that time.

If one side could claim a victory over the other by exposing Jesus as a fake or a sham Saviour, then it would give them even more power.

But Jesus doesn’t fall into that trap. Instead, He takes them right back to their origins; to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.

He begins by saying: “In the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise.”

Lk. 20: 37

That manifestation Moses had of the Living God at the burning bush in the desert where God revealed His personal name to Moses.

And in that encounter the Lord says; “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” Ex. 3: 6

These people had died hundreds of years before, yet the Lord refers to them as if they’re still alive, and with Him at that very moment.

And, of course, they are; because they died in the Lord’s friendship, and Jesus points to this in His reply to the Sadducees where He says: “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.”

Lk. 20: 38

So Jesus takes the Sadducees back beyond their human notions of immortality to the truth found in Scripture at that most important moment in Israel's history.

The burning bush is the moment when God reveals Himself in glory to Moses, and lets Him call Him by name.

He asks Moses to be His friend, to speak in His name, and to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt into the freedom of the Promised Land.

At that moment, time stood still because Moses could have said 'no' to this calling from the Lord; but he says 'yes' to doing the Lord's will.

Just as Mary said 'yes' to the Angel of the Lord when he invited her to bring the Saviour into the world.

The fundamental point Jesus is making is that the resurrection life beyond our death won't be the same as this one.

Death will have been defeated: so the need, as the Sadducees see it, to continue the family line will be irrelevant.

He doesn't mean that we'll be raised, and float around as spirits.

What Jesus is saying emphatically is that, like His resurrection, when we're raised from the dead, we will be raised body and spirit.

Yes, our resurrection bodies will be quite unlike our present ones; yet, at the same time, recognisable as us; just as the Lord was when He rose from the dead.

To God, our bodies really matter.

But they'll be appropriate for the new world of eternal life.

The new world in which death has been defeated, and no longer has any hold over us.

But, for the time being we live in this world; yet we know in our hearts that it's not the be all and end all.

We know that we're created for eternal life with the Lord; so we have that tension within us of being at home in this world, but wanting to be with the Lord.

Rather like one of those agonising dreams where you try to run, but you can't because your legs are like lead.

Imagine the sense of release and freedom if the dream were to change, and you could run like an athlete!

It might seem like that to us in our Christian lives; that we're being bound by invisible cords, which prevent us from getting closer to the Lord.

In a sense that's true; because if we do desire to have a close walk with Jesus then the powers of darkness will try to prevent it happening.

So what will break these invisible chains, set us free, and defeat the powers of darkness?

The answer is simple, and yet profound at the same time.

The answer is prayer.

Not merely words; but the sort of prayer that the Lord inspires by His Spirit, and attends to in His love.

In other words; true prayer has its roots in the Lord, and its growth is nurtured by His love.

So let's pray for each other - using Paul's words in the second reading - that, if we feel like the person in the dream whose legs were like lead, we'll experience the exhilaration of being released by the Lord to love Him as He first loved us.

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope, comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say. [And] May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ. [Amen.] 2 Th. 2: 16 - 17