

Third Sunday before Advent 2016

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man^[a] shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

³⁴ Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶ Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Today's Gospel is one of the more abstract pieces of Luke's Gospel.

At the time of this story from Luke's Gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem in the days before his crucifixion. The Sadducees were not really interested in the resurrection. In fact, they did not believe in the resurrection at all. The Sadducees only believed in the first five books of the Old Testament, and nowhere in these books was the idea of resurrection mentioned. Their real purpose was to attempt to compromise Jesus' authority.

Under the Law of Moses as mentioned in Deuteronomy 25:56, a man whose brother died without children was required to marry his brother's widow. The firstborn child of that union was to bear the name of the deceased brother so that the brother's lineage would continue. This law also benefitted the widow because it gave her financial security for the future. Procreation was necessary then as it is now, but it will not be necessary in the new life in Christ because people will not be subject to death any more.

Jesus' understanding of God's will is superior to ours or his opponents. Jesus' reply to the Sadducees affirms that there will be a resurrection where the new life will be much different from what we think it will be.

Our relationships with people will be deeper and different from what they were on earth. No longer will people be held captive by sin, age or health problems. In the New Testament, immortality and resurrection become linked in a "now" and "future" relationship.

We can't understand things we have not seen. We have to accept them by faith just like we have to accept God's Word by faith. Even the world's greatest preachers have trouble understanding the Word of God. It is sometimes hard for us to believe in the big things in life when we have so many little issues and struggles that we let take up lots of space in our lives. When we are obsessed with the little things in life so it is not easy for us to step back and understand everlasting life. We can only imagine what heaven will be like. Some people imagine it as a beautiful place with endless good times while others imagine it as a place where there will be no sickness, old age or pain. This is particularly appropriate as we are right into the remembrance season.

C.S. Lewis, who wrote "The Chronicles of Narnia", once told the story of a woman who was thrown into a dungeon. Her only light came from a barred window high above. She gave birth to a son, who had never seen the outside world. He could not reach the window to see outside, so his mother told him about green fields and waves crashing on the shore-but he could not imagine what she was describing. Eventually, she persuaded the guards to give her some paper and charcoal so she could draw pictures to show her son what the outside world was really like-but all that the boy came to understand was that the outside world looked like black lines on a white piece of paper.

The reality keeps returning to us and it is stark. We have to let go of today's relationships and trust God to give new relationships, otherwise our ability to accept the good news of resurrection and life after death is limited. Jesus does not tell us what lies ahead for us in heaven. Those who are willing to give their lives to God now will find that God will be there for them when the journey of

their earthly life is over. We are to love one another just as God loves us and share God's love for people in a way that excludes no one.

If God is our God, and we are his people, death is not the end of the story. It is the beginning. Someone once said that,

“today is the first day of the rest of your life”,

and that will be especially true on the day we die. The Sadducees' faith was one that was based on reason and law and not on faith and hope. Because their faith was purely based on today and not eternity, they were more than willing to compromise with the occupying powers of Rome so as to maintain their position of influence. As a result, they completely disappeared with the destruction of the Temple in AD 70.

The early church believed that the second coming would be quite imminent and so they did not need to worry too much about the future. Paul, in one of his more coherent letters which is today's Epistle, from 2 Thessalonians is sending a message to them that they should hold strong to the teachings of the faith and not be swayed by contemporary thought,

This could well be a message for the Church of England today. Peter Broadbent is the Bishop of Willesden, the suffragan bishop within the Diocese of London. He wrote recently that;

“Simplicity boils down to two steps: Identify the essential. Eliminate the rest. If the Church of England is to take seriously the need to reverse its trend of decline and commit itself to the renewal of the faith and the re-evangelisation of England, it needs the tools and structures to make that process possible. Four Task Groups have been working to devise a framework for change – in how we identify and train our senior leadership; how we allocate our resources better and focus on mission; how we call, equip and structure clergy and lay oversight; and how we simplify our structures. None of us is under any illusion that lasting change that makes a difference for the Kingdom of God can be achieved by tinkering with structures. The Church is first of all a Divine Society, underpinned by prayer, listening to scripture, worship and the life of the Spirit.

A change of heart and a reorientation towards love for God and love for neighbour – obedience to the Great Commission;

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”^l

and the Great Commandment,

*“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and **great commandment**. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two **commandments** hang all the law and the prophets.”*

These are the things that will breathe new life into the Church. The work of the Task Groups is to make what’s under the bonnet work better.”

The Sadducees died out when their institution became meaningless. The warning and advice of Paul to the Thessalonians is just as relevant to us today as it was in the time it was written. We must not allow ourselves to become bogged down in looking inwardly as I believe the Church of England is with its current pre-occupation with the Reform and Renewal programme, an excellent sounding idea but one that is, in my opinion, short on appeal and substance.

We must keep the big picture in mind. That was Jesus’ message to the Sadducees and Paul’s advice to the Thessalonians. In the coming months this may well be a message that we as a congregation in the United Benefice might do well to keep at the front of our minds as well.

Amen.