

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC November 10, 2019
32nd Sunday of Year C Luke 20: 27-38

Recently I had the occasion to go to Woodlawn cemetery in the Bronx for the internment of a parishioner. Woodlawn was at one time the cemetery where wealthy New Yorkers were buried, so it has many beautiful tombs, cenotaphs and mausoleums. While there the driver of the hearse pointed out to me something I had never seen before—tombs, carved not out of granite or marble but out of wood. Each was about four to five feet tall and about three feet in diameter. One was of an eagle, another of an owl, another of a charging lion or bull. Each was varnished so that it glistened in the sun. I know that people are always trying to do something different, to stand out, to stand apart, but at a cemetery this struck me as just a bit odd. It's probably part of a desire to continue to exist at least in memory after one has died. And that is probably what is at root of the Jewish custom about a man having to marry his deceased brother's wife, that is the basis for the question put to Jesus.

The Sadducees did not believe in any sort of life after death, Then, as today, Judaism was divided on this question---some Jews believed in an existence after death, others did not. The Sadducees try to show the absurdity—to their way of thinking--of such a belief by pushing it to extremes with their puzzler of the seven brothers who had all married the same woman. They ask, if there is some kind of resurrection of the dead, whose wife will that woman be? Hidden in the question is the patriarchal assumption that she will belong to, be the property of someone.

The question is why did the Jews have this requirement that a man had to marry his deceased brother's wife and produce for him a child, an heir? There were two reasons---one was to keep the property within the family, the clan. (We of course have more sophisticated methods of estate planning). But more important was to assure the dead man would continue to exist in his progeny. This law came about rather early in Judaism when there was no belief in a life after death. So, the only way an individual lived on was in his descendants. This was the limited kind of immortality that any human being could hope to possess. This was how he would be remembered, how he would be immortalized.

Admittedly, speaking of life after death is like describing a color no one has ever seen. Still, the words of the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson can be helpful, as when he said, "Because of the beauty (of creation) that I have seen, I trust the Creator for what I have not yet seen." In other words, even though our human imagination is not able to grasp or comprehend what an after life might be like, even

though we might be completely agnostic about the precise ways in which God will provide for His chosen ones, in an alternative dimension of existence distinct from what we are now familiar with, still we can make an act of faith that the God who put this whole complex and beautiful universe together in the first place is able to devise a plan whereby all that is good, beautiful, loving and just is preserved and renewed in another dimension of existence beyond the grave. Even in the realm of science there are ideas that we cannot necessarily conceptualize, that we can't put our mind around (such as quantum mechanics or string theory) that still we can assert as true. So, why not with a belief in a life after death? With faith we are dispensed from having to worry about how it will come to be. We can simply allow that God can figure out how it will come to be.

Jesus challenges the Sadducees in that their idea of what an existence after death might be like is too narrow; it's limited to being merely a replication of life on this side of the grave—something like the native American idea of a "happy hunting ground." Jesus says, resurrected life is different from what we know of this life. He expresses this by saying that "in the age to come there will be no giving and taking in marriage, for those found worthy of a place they will become like angels." We become "like angels," not in the sense that we are given wings and a handed a harp to play for all eternity---pretty boring—but are like the angels who don't make babies, and so we don't have to make children as a hedge against mortality. In short, Jesus affirms the existence of a life after death, but one that is different from our present experience.

Jesus does not stop here. He refers to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as being dead, but still present to God. They are somehow still alive, so that God is a "God of the living, not of the dead." Jesus is implying that the Saducees are not only mistaken about the afterlife but also about God, because God is all about life. There is no hint or trace of death in God. It is the God of abundant and overflowing life who will empower Jesus to face the terrible death that the Sadducees and the other power-brokers of Jerusalem will soon inflict upon Him. Because Jesus is so deeply united to this God of life, death has no hold over Him. He is able to fully engage what lies before Him, trusting that His death on the cross will not be the final word.

That is the same God to whom we also are invited to entrust our lives. In doing so, we open ourselves to life and not to death. This is the "good news," that at the core of reality is this abundance of life that can give direction to all our actions, rather than the specter of death dominating and controlling them. That is what faith offers to us. Sadly, the situation is very much the opposite. Too often we live in the shadow of death, whether we admit it or not, whether we be conscious of it or not, so that It is the fear of death that shapes our lives. We construct a variety of strategies, upon

which we focus all our attention and all our energy in order to give our lives meaning and significance, thereby attempting to keep the reality of death at bay.

In a few moments in the Eucharist we will receive the risen Christ who offers us the possibility of sharing in His risen life. Because He was united to the God of abundant life, He was empowered to embrace life without fear of death.. Let us pray that that awareness, that conviction, can be ours.