

32nd Sunday. 2007

1. As winter sets in, the church year is nearing its close and the readings assigned for these final Sundays before Advent begin to concentrate on what we used to call the last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell. Today's Gospel focuses on belief in the resurrection of the dead and is therefore a preparation for the discussion of these themes, because if we do not survive death, if we simply cease to be in death, there cannot be a judgment, nor can there be reward or punishment.

2. In our Lord's time the Jewish community was split on the question of whether or not there was survival after death. The Sadducees, who were the wealthy and educated members of Jewish society at the time, were conservative in their beliefs. They did not accept as God's Word all the books of what we now recognize as the Old Testament but concentrated instead on the Pentateuch, or the Torah, which is the first five books of the bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In these books there

is no explicit mention of resurrection. Therefore, for the Sadducees their religion consisted of fidelity to God in this life, and God would reward them for such fidelity by blessing them with family, friends and land or wealth. In other words, religion had to do with God's blessing here and now in this life. The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed in the rising of the dead to a new life. Jesus belonged to their school of thought.

3. In our Gospel today the Sadducees, apparently knowing Jesus' position on this question, want to embarrass him by showing everybody how absurd it is to believe in a life after death. So they confront him with a story about a woman who married seven brothers in succession. Since she has been the wife of all seven, whose wife will she be in the resurrection, they ask him. They think that Jesus will not be able to answer that question. and that will prove that his belief in life after death is foolish.

4. Jesus' answers their question by denying the premise of their argument which is that life in the next world is simply

a repeat of life here. It is different, Jesus claims. People don't die in the next life, and so there is no marrying, because people do not need to have children. And then Jesus tells them that even in the Torah or Pentateuch, in ch. 3:4 of Exodus, there is talk of resurrection. Here the Lord's argument may be a bit hard to follow, but let us try. In the desert Moses sees a burning bush and approaches it to see how this bush is burning but not being destroyed. A voice comes from the bush, calls him by name and tells him not to come closer. Then the voice identifies itself by saying: "I am the god of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6-7). Jesus uses these words and argues: God is a God of the living, not the dead. Therefore, if Abraham and Isaac and Jacob still belong to God in the time of Moses, who lived much later than they did, then they must still be alive. Then Jesus adds: "For to him all are alive."

5. For some of us the argument may be a bit hazy. We can see that it is saying that these men, long dead, still belong to God, the God of the living. That means, according to the

Lord, that they are alive in God. But does “being alive in or for God” mean that they are alive as individuals? Could it not mean that God remembers these men just as we remember our dead? It would seem that the Lord presumes that this is not the meaning, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are more than a memory for God. They as individuals are alive in him.

6. The French Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin once wrote that it his personal survival, his personal immortality, did not matter much to him. But then he argued. But God must save what is the richest and best in all his creation, and what is richer than the human person in his or her individuality and uniqueness. That is the best of his creation, and that is what God must save. And so on the basis of this argument he had to believe in his personal immortality.

7. Yes, as Jesus said, there is no marrying in eternal life, for time and history will be over with then, and the human race will not have to propagate itself to continue. But, on the

other hand, all that has been good in history will be collected into this new life, all that was best in it. People will not marry then, but those who were married will certainly be there in all the fullness of their love for each other, for this was part of their history, this was what made them who they were.

8. Whether we are young or old, we all know that we will die. But the promise of resurrection must change the way we look at our deaths and of our lives before death. We are marching not towards extinction but towards life. That message should give us joy. It should order our priorities. It should give us courage and direction in our daily lives. It should teach us what to value and what not to value. Yes, in God we are all alive, and forever.