

### **“To Him All Are Alive” – Lk 20:27-38 – Nov 11, 2007**

Well, the gloves are starting to come off in the run-up to the election in the Excited States of America, and to borrow the title from Jack Cafferty’s new book, “It’s Getting Ugly Out There!” Whatever the results may turn out to be I think everyone can agree that there is a pile of healing to be done down there! Their country is polarized and divided like at no time in the last few (or even many) decades. The TV debates continue, and while a lot of questions have been asked and sort of answered, there’s not been a lot of listening, never mind learning, going on.

But that’s nothing new, is it? Our reading from Luke this morning is another perfect example of that same phenomenon – questions, answers, and not a lot of listening. But before we look at the details of Jesus’ encounter with the ‘religious right’ of his day, we need to refresh our memories of the buildup to this encounter. Jesus has recently arrived in Jerusalem – pausing only to tarry a while at Zaccheus’ house. He came into the city riding on a colt while the people spread their cloaks in his path, and he paused to lament over the coming fate of that city. Just before our reading, Jesus did his “temple rage” thing, driving out those who were desecrating the temple by using it like a business centre.

Needless to say, his attack on the religious establishment did not go unnoticed; it was not well received by the authorities in the temple, and a series of controversial encounters ensued with those leaders. Prior to today’s encounter they have already challenged him with two crucial questions: what is the source of his authority, and about the rightness of paying taxes. Now when we say it like that, it all sounds pretty smooth, and academic, doesn’t it? A question ‘about the source of his authority’. Even when you read Luke’s account of that controversy it sounds all pretty blasé – “tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?” It all comes across rather like a pompous English Don at Oxford, but I suspect it was much more heated, as is “what the flaming blankety-blank do you think you’re doing?!” And Jesus threw some gasoline on that bonfire by turning their question about authority back on his attackers – the chief priests and scribes. For good measure he even added a parable to demonstrate how they – chief priests and the scribes – are no better than bad tenants in God’s house (the temple).

Enraged, the chief priests and scribes hired spies to watch Jesus and to try to trap him into saying something for which he could be prosecuted. Those spies asked the question about paying taxes to see if Jesus would fall into the trap of secular allegiance, but Jesus responded with the perfect answer of giving to the emperor what was his, and giving to God what was God’s. With no way to trap Jesus, the spies ‘became silent’.

Now it’s the Sadducees’ turn, who came asking a question about the resurrection. “Now Moses wrote ...”, they begin, setting the trap, and continuing to ask about the status of a woman, married (legally) seven times, in the resurrection. We need to remember that this is a trick question - these Sadducees were not bereaved persons seeking hope. This was no innocent question posed by believers searching for some clarity on the doctrine of resurrection. This was one of those trick questions posed by people already fixed like Crazy Glue in their position that there is no resurrection of the dead. I’m sure you’ve encountered the same kind of people – I know I have – people who have a solidly fixed point of view, and who ask a question designed to make you support their position even, or especially, when it conflicts with your own position. Those kinds of questions always have a kind of smarmy or smart-alecky flavour, don’t they, and there’s always a kind of smugness about the person asking the question, as it they can’t wait for the answerer to have to concede how clever and how right they are. It’s a real treat and delight to watch someone respond to such a ‘baiting’ question with a really, really clever answer that not only answers the question asked, but exposes the questioner’s real motives at the same time.

Jesus provided just that kind of clever answer, and it is a treat to watch him. He answers his challengers in two parts, beginning by telling them that their question is silly, or at the very least inappropriate. He tells them we can’t even compare life here and life in the age to come, pointing specifically to a key difference, namely that the concept of marriage doesn’t even apply in that age. Jesus gives them a huge sense of the resurrection being an age or place of great innocence, with the people being described as angelic, as children, and in such an innocent place the concept of marrying doesn’t even exist. What an effective way to prick the Sadducees’ balloon, eh?! That innocence portrayed by Jesus stands in

clear contrast to the anything-but-innocent question posed by the Sadducees, and their cunning guile stands out even more clearly by that contrast.

But it's the second part of Jesus' answer that provides the 'slam-dunk'. The Sadducees started out by "proof-texting" – quoting Scripture ("Moses writes...") to prove their point. The Sadducees were pretty conservative – they considered only the first five books of scripture – attributed to Moses – as being authoritative. To them, if it wasn't in the first five books of the Old Testament it had no authority. In a delicious twist, Jesus answers not only using the same body of Scripture, Exodus 3:6, but uses the very call of Moses, the moment when God confronts Moses from the burning bush, to show the Sadducees that God considers the very founding fathers of the faith, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob to still be very much alive. "Now he is the God of the living; for to him all of them are alive", Jesus concludes. What could they possibly say? Not a thing, and as Luke tells us, "they no longer dared to ask him another question." I guess not! Of course, now it was Jesus' turn to do the asking, and to warn the people about the religious poobahs who would live for appearances, but that's for another day.

So what do we learn from this controversial encounter between the Sadducees and Jesus? We learn a little bit about the age of the resurrection – there aren't many details, only enough to whet our appetites. It's interesting to me at least that Jesus doesn't say a word about immortal souls, or even about immortality itself. It is clear that life does continue somehow beyond life here on earth, that we move into a new age, a new place, that cannot be described by or even compared with our earthly existence. I think one thing we can learn from this encounter is that there is no need or even point in trying to go into elaborate and detailed descriptions of what resurrection life will be like.

Another really important thing we can learn from this encounter is to simply relax and be at peace in our faith. We don't need to be clever Sadducees – in fact it looks like **not** being a tightly-wound, legalistic, smart-aleck Sadducee is a good thing. Neither do we need to be – nor do we want to be – tightly-wound, legalistic, pompous and harsh Pharisees, for they get stomped on by Jesus as much as do the Sadducees. And I don't think anyone, especially after reading Matthew's litany of the times Jesus said "woe to you, scribes and Pharisees", thinks that it might be a good thing to be a scribe, either. Remember, when they tried to trap Jesus by asking which of the ten commandments was the best rule of all, he simplified the whole matter into "love God with all you are; love one another as you are loved".

However, and more importantly, we learn one more time of the power and goodness of God. It sounds so simple when you say it quickly – "God is God of the living" – but in that short little phrase is the essence of our faith. God is a living God, alive and active in His creation, and caring for the living, for you, and for me. "I have come that you might have life, and life abundant", Jesus proclaimed, including us in the living of whom and for whom God is indeed God. We do not worship a rock, or a tree, or any other part of God's creation – we worship a living God, who not only brought this magnificent and incomprehensible universe into being, but breathed life and spirit into it, and into us.

We are a resurrection people – we profess at the heart of our faith that "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again". Although we love to elaborate, and to speculate on what it will look like, and to tease ourselves with the when and the how it will all come together, at the center of our faith is what Jesus proclaimed here – "he is God not of the dead, but of the living, for to him all of them are alive." In life, in death, in the resurrection we are still reconciled with God, inseparable from his love in Christ, the living Son of the God of the living.

Especially on this Sunday that coincides with Remembrance Day it is good to remember that to God, "all are alive". It is good to remember the promise that some day we will be able to join those who surrendered their futures that we might live out ours in peace and faith, and say to them, "thanks - we remembered you." Thanks be to God that in his love and through Jesus Christ we are assured of joining together with them in that place where there will be no more tears, and no more partings, and where all celebrate to the glory of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.