

“Being In the Here and Now” – Lk 20:27-38 – Nov 7, 2010

Well, the latest election in the Excited States of America is over, and whatever you think of the results I think everyone can agree that politics there – and here in B.C. for that matter – have sunk to a new level of nastiness that I can’t remember seeing before. Opinions are increasingly polarized; there seems to be no room for compromise but lots of room for personal attacks and divisive doctrines. We bemoan an apparent lack of leadership, but who in their right mind would want to assume or accept a leadership role in today’s environment? It seems that more and more people really don’t want good leadership, unless of course that ‘good leadership’ means that their own ideas are implemented. Any other course of action evokes increasing anger that manifests in calls for ever-increasing rejection, isolation, reaction, and hostility.

And there is a new vehicle that not only aids this movement but seems to exacerbate it. That is the wondrous media called the Internet. It seems bizarre but the so-called “Social Media” is actually fostering a new level of anti-social behaviour that boggles the mind. There was a time when in order to get your voice heard and respected someone with opinions had to rise through ranks of some sort, in a process of affirmation that the opinions should be taken seriously. Now any nut-job with a keyboard and ten dollars to create a blog site is able to spread their opinions across the globe, and to attract like-minded people into their bizarre realms of thought. Everyone is an instant expert today – never mind the facts! For all the good that is being done by the explosive availability of information on the Internet – and there is a huge pile of good – there is another pile of ‘stuff’ that is corroding society.

But it seems like the current shift away from graciousness is not a new phenomenon, either. Our reading from Luke this morning is another perfect example of that same phenomenon. However, 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. A lot has happened to Jesus and the disciples since last week, when we watched Jesus invite himself and the gang over to Zacchaeus’ house in Jericho. Here, Jesus has already arrived in Jerusalem, riding on a colt while the people spread their cloaks in his path, and pausing to lament over the coming fate of that city. Jesus has already cleansed the temple, driving out those who were corrupting that holy place with crass financial transactions.

Needless to say, this attack on the religious establishment did not go unnoticed, and was not well received by the authorities in the temple, and a series of controversial encounters ensued with those leaders. They have already accosted him with two challenging questions: regarding the source of his authority, and the issue of paying taxes. Now when we say it like that, it all sounds pretty smooth, and academic, doesn’t it? A question ‘regarding 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 in “just who do you think you are, doing what you’re doing?!” And that tense situation was not made any better by Jesus, who turned their attacking question back on the chief priests and scribes, and added a parable to demonstrate how the chief priests and the scribes were 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 we come to our reading for today, and this time 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 was 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 if 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 answer, and it is a treat to watch him. He answers them in two parts, beginning by telling them that their question is silly, or at the very least inappropriate. Life here and life in the age to come can't even be compared, he tells them, pointing out a key difference, namely that the concept of marriage doesn't even apply in that age. What an effective way to prick the Sadducees' balloon, eh?! There is 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. The innocence portrayed by Jesus stands in clear contrast to the 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 had started out quoting Scripture ("Moses writes...") to prove their point. The Sadducees considered only the first five books of 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, but 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 there is a continuation of some sort into a new age, a new place, that cannot be described by or even compared with our earthly existence. I think we can learn from this encounter that there is no need or even value in trying to go into elaborate and detailed descriptions of what resurrection life will be like.

We can also learn one more thing 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.

And I think here is the key of what Jesus was saying – that we should live in the here and now, relating to and connecting with a living God. But what exactly does that mean, “living or being in the ‘here and now’”? On the one hand it is a clarion call to reality. It is a call not to live in some dream or fantasy world of the future, a world of perfection where all of today’s troubles no longer exist and everyone is eternally singing, “everything is beautiful, in its own way!” At the same time the call to live or be in the present is an urging to realize that “the good old days” are not only long gone, they weren’t necessarily all that good anyway. Both the highly-filtered good memories of the long-ago past and the impossible dreams of the far future are unattainable and dwelling upon them or even immersed in them is unrealistic. I loved Jon Stewart’s quote at the “Rally to Restore Reason/Fear” last week, when he said, “we live in hard times, not end times.”

“God is God of the living”, Jesus told his detractors – and at this moment we are the living for whom God is God. Here, now, in the present, God is here for us. Not some cranky, crusty, bearded old guy issuing instructions to Noah, or Moses. Not some glowing figure sitting remotely upon a throne in the resurrection kingdom. Well, yes, that too, but more importantly God is God of the living, of us. Being in the here and now implies recognizing that we also, in our turn, are recipients of the life abundant that Jesus came to bring. That doesn’t necessarily mean that we will get all the toys we want, or that life will be trouble-free, or even that we will have our own impressive blog site and every politician will listen only to us and act upon our very opinions. But it does mean that our lives do indeed have meaning; that even if no-one else in the world listens to us, God will, with great compassion and understanding. It does mean that we are not isolated, either in time or across time, because we are one in communion and community with everyone else who has faith, and calls upon Christ.

Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from this encounter between Jesus and his detractors 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 take as much of a trouncing from Jesus 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. When Jesus was asked which 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”.

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.” Be in the here and now, reconciled with God, inseparable from his love in Christ, the living Son of the God of the living, and to him be all thanks and praise.