

“Divine Future” – Lk 20:27-38 – Nov 10, 2013

I get tons and tons of email every day, and a lot of that is what’s called spam – junk mail, usually scams of one sort or another. You’ve probably either received similar stuff or at least you’ve heard of it – messages from some supposed benefactor in Nigeria whose husband left them a huge fortune and they want to give it to the church, and all I have to do is either reply to the email or worse yet click on some attachment or website address.

Now I have a pretty effective adaptive spam filter on my mail server, and it keeps getting better and better at filtering this crud out so that I don’t see it, but there is no end to the creativity of these scam artists, and so a fair amount still gets through. I don’t mind too much, as it’s easy enough to right-click on them and send them to the filter for training.

However, there is a class of mail that doesn’t quite fit that category in that it comes from someone or some company whose products I’m interested in, and yet what they’re offering is bizarre. No, I’m not talking about exotic sites that offer interesting thingies ... in fact, the one that triggered me this week is actually a church-oriented site, one that offers PowerPoint slides to use as backgrounds for worship services. You’ve probably seen the kind of thing I mean, where the hymns and readings and stuff are put up on a video screen, with a lovely churchy background scene.

But it was while I was looking at the latest offering from these folks this week that I did a double-take – there was a picture of a nuclear explosion mushroom cloud, and I think the text read something like “In the Resurrection ...” (I can’t be sure, because I deleted the email!) This of course was supposed to be connected with our gospel reading for today. My immediate reaction was “good grief!” but then I realized what was happening. They were targeting an audience (people with very fundamentalist beliefs) for whom the Resurrection is a profoundly negative experience – at least hopefully profoundly negative for all the people they don’t like! My second thought – one which has lasted until at least now – was “what a misunderstanding and abuse of this piece of scripture from Luke’s gospel!” Let’s take a deeper look at this piece of scripture and see if you agree with me about that misuse.

We’ll begin by recognizing that 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 gone on a rampage, cleansing the temple by driving out those who were corrupting that holy place with crass financial transactions.

Needless to say, his attack on the religious establishment did not go unnoticed; neither was it well received by the authorities in the temple. Not surprisingly Jesus became embroiled in a series of controversial encounters with those leader in which they went at him with two challenging questions: one regarding the source of his authority, and another over 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 of course 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).

Now fully 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 according to Luke 'became silent'.

And so 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 we might note) seven times, in the resurrection. It is vitally important 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 concrete 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, a setting 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 other than to know it is good, very good – a truly divine future.

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.

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.” We can and should anticipate a divine future in the Resurrection, but for the moment 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 give to him all thanks and praise.