

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 32<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

2 Maccabees 7: 1-2, 9-14 Psalm 17 2 Thessalonians 2: 16- 3:5 Luke 20: 27-38

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

You can tell the liturgical year is coming to an end; the issues placed before us these last three weeks are about what comes next. Today we focus on the resurrection. It's not so much about how and when our present age will end, as it is about what our futures will be after this age passes away and the time of human life is ended. Both the first and third readings treat of the resurrection. They present a serious faith question to us: do we believe that our bond with God will not be broken by death and will continue into the next age? We know that on our own we humans cannot guarantee our lives; death defeats us. But we believe that God will not let go of us but will stay united with us as we pass through death. The scriptures constantly reinforce this basis of our faith: we have entered into a relationship with God that will not be broken, even by such a powerful force as death.

To feed our faith and stir our imaginations, the scriptures present us with many images of the new life we have received through faith. For example, the gospels refer to our drinking living waters; being born again; belonging to the reign of God, etc. Of course, these are only images or metaphors for what we have received now and what we will have when our present lives end. But they are not detailed descriptions of what our new lives will be like. They are metaphors that intend to help us to envision the new and eternal life we have entered into. People try to fill in the blanks, they draw from daily life or from their imaginations and try to paint a picture of what's ahead. For example, popular notions furnish the heavenly realms with “pearly gates,” streets of gold, harps, winged angels, thrones, etc. While such projections envision things vastly improved in heaven, nevertheless, they suggest the new age will be basically the same as what we have known here. The fact of the matter is—we just don't know.

In today's gospel the Sadducees attempt to draw from our human existence to show the absurdity of faith in the resurrection. They argue from examples in this life, as if the next would merely be a non-stop, uninterrupted trip from this one. Who were these Sadducees? Many of us ponder questions about the resurrection

because we want reassurance that our loved ones, who have died, have not ceased to exist, but live in a place of unending joy, freed from this world's pain and sadness. We also want help for our own faith as we face the end of our own lives. Resurrection and life in a new age speak to these basic longings. But the Sadducees were not grieving the loss of loved ones, nor were they honest searchers, when they posed to Jesus their questions about the resurrection. They had already formulated their positions; they did not believe in the resurrection.

The Sadducees were a priestly and aristocratic class. They fostered good relations with the Romans and therefore prospered; many were wealthy. They based their religious beliefs on what was written only in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, the books of Moses. Thus, the Sadducees did not accept the resurrection because it is not taught in Mosaic writings. They differed from the Pharisees, who accepted the teachings of the oral tradition of the written texts that did profess life after death. Both parties debated endlessly from their own positions (Acts 23: 6-10). We hear in today's gospel that the Sadducees also brought their debate to Jesus. You get a sense that no matter how Jesus answers their question, the Sadducees are speaking from a fixed position with no chance for change. How frustrating it must have been for Jesus to enter into a discussion with the Sadducees, for they showed no signs of being open to a true dialogue.

Nevertheless, Jesus responds to the Sadducees in terms they should have understood. He suggests you can't formulate what life will be like in the next age by using the logic and customs of this one. The Sadducees used as the basis for their argument a teaching from Deuteronomy (25: 5-10) which says, if a man dies with no heir, in order to preserve his property and the family name, his brother was to take the widow as his wife. The Sadducees draw from this custom and present the case of the death of all seven brothers and its seeming impossible consequences for life in the next age. "Now in the resurrection whose wife will that woman be?" (I wonder how women in the congregation will hear this story of a woman being passed down from one brother to another? What, for the Sadducees, is a point of debate, is for women an issue of being treated like property, with no say in one's own future.)

Jesus responds by declaring that there is a profound difference between this age and the next. In this age marriage and procreation are important for life to continue. But in the next age, things will be very different: people will not die,

will not have to provide for future generations or worry about property and who inherits it. Death will be no more and so, like angels. We will be alive and have a share in God's life.

God has made a covenant with us that can never be broken—not even by death.

While the next life will be radically different from this one, our bond with God, forged in this life, will endure in the next. That is, I think, the core of this passage: the invitation to have faith in God and the unbreakable covenant we have with God. The God of love, revealed to us in Jesus, will see us through the passage to the next life.

But then the issue is: how does this faith and the hope in our secure future with God affect our lives now? The Maccabees were willing to suffer torments and die rather than separate themselves from God. As the fourth brother puts it, they had “the hope God gives of being raised by God....” Hope in the resurrection gives meaning to our present lives and strengthens us in times of trial, as it did for the Maccabees and their mother. With a resurrection lens we can view what our world considers valuable, seeks after and clings to, from a different perspective. We get a new focus on life through resurrection lens. From this perspective we ask ourselves: am I investing my energies in what will last or in mere ephemera? How am I spending my time in the light of my lasting covenant with God? While Jesus notes how different the next age will be, our full participation in it certainly is affected by our present choices and priorities. We do have a future to look forward to—so what are we doing about it now?

The virtue of hope might embolden us to invest more of our selves in large projects we may never see completed in our lifetimes, but nevertheless, manifest our commitment to God's ways and our resurrection hope: such projects as working for peace, an end to world hunger, gender and racial equality, etc. Big projects indeed, entered into because they are part of God's plan and we know what we can't finish will be carried on by the next generation of resurrection-hopefuls.

While Jesus doesn't give us a clear picture of what awaits us—grand vistas, celestial music, constant feasting, etc.---he does assure us that if we stay in relationship with God, nothing can destroy that bond, not even death. Today's eucharist feeds us with the life that strengthens and renews our covenant with God. In the end, all of life is an opportunity for friendship with God and death will not

put an end to this friendship.

## **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER**

Alice L. Camille, *GOD’S WORD IS ALIVE!: ENTERING THE SUNDAY READINGS*. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications), 1998. ISBN0-89622-926-2. Paper.

Brief reflections on each of the three scripture readings for the three-year lectionary cycle. For each Sunday or feast day there are brief homiletical reflections, three “Questions for Reflection” and a suggested “Action response.” (Cf. “Quotable” below) Helpful for preachers, RCIA and bible study groups. This book was recommended to me by a pastor who told me he finds it very helpful.

## **QUOTABLE**

Children of the resurrection are children of God

The Sadducees bring a bad parody of the Maccabees story to Jesus. Instead of seven martyred brothers keeping faith with God’s law, they tell of seven brothers faithful to Levirate law by marrying the same woman. If the resurrection is for real, they asked, who gets the woman?

Jesus brushes off this ludicrous question as a product of the children of this age. Levirate law, even marriage itself, is a temporal issue. Jesus knows that the heart of the inquiry is the plausibility of the resurrection, which he affirms by appealing to Moses, the giver of the law, an authority the Sadducees respect.

People destined to become like the angels are not to be bound by legalism and human controls. In the resurrection, nobody “gets the woman,” because women and men will know the freedom of being God’s children.

—Alice L. Camille, page 351.

## **JUSTICE NOTES**

We lose about ten thousand children every year to poverty. That’s more children over a five-year period than (people) we lost in the Vietnam War. But where is the outrage?

----Marian Wright Edelman (quoted in "Peace Moments," published by Pax Christi, 1997.)

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- William Gregory           #0156529   (On death row since 8/15/94)
- Johnathon Hoffman       #0186563   (11/14/96)
- Le Roy Mc Neil           #0275780   (11/15/96)

----Central Prison   1300 Western Blvd.   Raleigh, NC   27606