



Over recent years the Church of England has identified the period from All Saints Day to Advent Sunday (basically the month of November) as ‘the Kingdom Season’, with the liturgical colour red. Including All Saints, All Souls, Remembrance Sunday and the Feast of Christ the King, as well as being in the depths of autumn, it is a time particularly given over to remembrance, reflection and recollection, all things that certainly have value, but which can lead to melancholy, which can all too easily slip from being delicious (a review of good things in our pasts) to becoming corrosive (those good things have all been lost, and there is no hope for the future). I know this tendency in myself, and I know that two and a bit years of plague restrictions, coupled with even a cursory review of the state of the world today, do nothing to lift the spirits. But that is not the intention behind the Kingdom Season – rather it is an encouragement to us to use reflection on the past as a springboard into the future, building on the good foundations laid before, and avoiding making again the mistakes of the past that have led before to misery and human diminishment.



The first reading today, from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, is his attempt to reassure a young church that, whilst life in the world will bring all sort of tribulations, they are not to see every such upheaval as a coming of the end times. When those times do come they will know full well because the signs will be incontrovertible. But, in any case, the people making up the church in Thessalonica need not be anxious, because, ‘God has [chosen] them as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.’ What is required of them is that they ‘stand firm and hold fast’ to the faith that they have been taught. Whilst we cannot claim to be a young church, we nevertheless are like those

Thessalonian Christians in being chosen by God through belief in the truth, and, though our world may seem to be a sea of tumult and troubles, we, with them, ‘will obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ’ if only we ‘stand fast and hold firm.’



Today’s gospel reading from Luke opens with some Sadducees posing a question to Jesus. The Sadducees represented the upper echelons of Jewish society, were conservative in outlook and were strongly (though not exclusively) associated with the priestly caste, with responsibility for maintenance of the Jerusalem Temple. Our readings of the New Testament often put them in clear opposition to the Pharisees, and there were differences in belief (notably that the Pharisees favoured the oral tradition of the Torah and believed in resurrection, whereas the Sadducees demanded a more literal interpretation of the written Torah and did not believe in resurrection). That said, both Sadducees and Pharisees were members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, and both loved to develop their faith through discussion, sometimes, as in this case, on abstruse topics. This method of advancing an argument by drawing conclusions from an extreme hypothetical example is somewhat alien to us, but it was not exceptional at the time. In this case, however, it is difficult to imagine that they hoped to gain anything from the discussion, other than to score a point over Jesus. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, so why were they asking who would be the wife of the much married man in the resurrection? Why, in any case, were they enquiring into a law (given in Deuteronomy 25:5-6) that had long fallen into disuse by the time this question was put?



They hoped to trap Jesus into supporting the idea of resurrection (and thereby proving, in their eyes, his view misguided) by recourse to an absurd argument, but Jesus cuts through this obscurantism by stating that a law which was intended to provide a way of ensuring a legal succession had no place in a (heavenly) existence which, by its nature, has no place for death itself.

But Jesus goes on to press his point much further than his questioners intended, or even conceived. He challenges the Sadducees to recognise that even their beloved written Torah implies a belief in eternal life. Quoting from Exodus 3:6 the passage about, ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob’ does not sound to us very convincing as a proof of eternal life, but to those accustomed to the rabbinic method, relying on the precise wording of the scriptural text, this is conclusive, only living beings have a God, inanimate objects and the dead can only have a creator. If this morning’s gospel reading had gone on one verse more we would have learnt that the Sadducees were very impressed with Jesus’ argument, and, a further verse would have told us that they dared not ask him any more questions.



That is all very well, as far as it goes, but I am indebted to the late Professor Caird of Oxford for expressing Jesus' argument in a way more congenial to the modern mind:

*All life, here and hereafter, consists in friendship with God, and nothing less is worthy of the name of life. Abraham was the friend of God, and it is incredible that such friendship should be severed by death. Death may put an end to physical existence, but not to a relationship that is by nature eternal. People may lose their friends by death, but not God.*



I find this a very helpful thought to hold in this Kingdom season, when we remember those who have died, our own dear ones, those people of faith who have inspired and encouraged us, and those whose lives have been cut short by war, or when we are forced to consider the turbulence of our own times, economically, in relation to disease, climate change, natural disaster and war. *People may lose their friends by death, but not God.*

Clive Lemmon