

SERMON AT BRUNSWICK: 11/11/2001: GEOFF CHADWICK: 23RD

SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST OS32: LK 20:27-40:

“THE LIVING DEAD OR THE DEADLY LIVING”

Today’s Gospel reading is one of those curious ones. It consists of a “tricky” question being put to Jesus by the Sadducees about the resurrection of the dead. This is the first time we meet the Sadducees in Lk’s Gospel and the question they put is a curly hypothetical one. It is quite likely that the question is a stock question they often put to their opponents, the Pharisees, but this time it is Jesus who gets it.

“Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers....[and they all died before her]... Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” (Lk 20:27ff, NRSV).

This absurd question is designed to make a theological point. The Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, try to catch Jesus out but Jesus discounts their absurdity with the statement: “Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” (Lk 20:38, NRSV).

Jesus is implying that despite physical death human beings continue on with some form of “after-life.” The nature of this after-life remains mysterious – yet we are given a clue- “... they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.” (Lk 20:36, NRSV); but this clue remains elusive. Just exactly what this means is not clear. Speculation about the “after-life” was rife at the time of Jesus. For Jews there was a concept of “Sheol” or “place of shadows” where the dead resided. The Greeks however debated much on whether the soul was immortal as opposed to

the perishable body; and even in early Christian circles there were debates about whether the resurrected are furnished with some form of new body.

In the end, all this speculation remains just that- for we cannot really know just what the “after-life” is like. What lies on the other side of this life remains a mystery and perhaps it is best that way. Mystery will evoke the best in us – music, poetry, art. Speculation can lead us to absurdity – mystery, however, leads us to devotion. In the end we worship a God not of dumb questions but “a God of the living.”

Fitzmyer in his commentary on Luke’s Gospel (1985, p1301) makes the comment:

“The question between Jesus and the Sadducees is not Plato’s but Job’s, not ‘if a man die is he still alive’ but ‘if a man die shall he live again.’”

The question is not “Do we continue as we always have?” The question is “Is there something new?” Or putting it another way; do things continue on naturally or is there a new form of life given to us as a gift. Jesus implies that the second is the case, not the first. Resurrection implies some form of new life that is given to us.

When I was in theological college, a group of us had to design a survey for the development of a new parish in an outer Perth suburb. The first question we composed was “How long have you been living here?” One of my good mates with a sharp mind objected to the wording of the question and suggested that we ask: “How long have you been dying here?” He was shot down in flames for suggesting a stupid question- one that was that was far too provocative – or even theological! But isn’t interesting that I still remember it some years later. How interesting it would be to ask people: “How long have you been dying here?” I think this picks up the essence of the quote from my commentary: “The question between Jesus and the Sadducees is not

Plato's but Job's, not 'if a man die is he still alive' but 'if a man die shall he live again'" (Fitzmyer, 1985, p1301). Perhaps there are many who have not lived the first time. Perhaps the world is full of the "living dead" or the "deadly living". Perhaps the question "How long have you been dying here?" is more pertinent that we realise. As we speculate on the nature of life after death we can neglect to speculate on the nature of death in this life. What deathly things do we perpetuate so that the world becomes the place of the "living dead" rather than the place of the living? Well here are a few:

- Greed
- Starvation, hunger
- Violence
- Discouragement
- Boredom
- Exhaustion
- Ect.

I'm sure you can add to the list. Perhaps you are the victim of some of these. Perhaps you are not as fully alive as you would like. Perhaps you are "living dead" or "deadly living".

"How long have you been dying here?"

Not to worry – Jesus invites us into resurrection life – the gift of something new that begins not on the other side of the grave but begins right here each day.

"Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." (Lk 20:38, NRSV).

The Lord be with you

And also with you.