

Thirty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

I get very nervous when somebody comes to me expecting that I will know all the answers to the questions that they have. When I was first ordained a priest, I often thought that I did know the answers to most of the questions that people might ask me. But I soon discovered that I still had a lot to learn.

Our gospel today is part of a series of debates that Jesus had with people who were not open to learning and understanding things in a fresh way. They were debates with those who held religious authority in the time of Jesus. What we hear today is a debate with the Jewish religious sect that was called the Sadducees. The Sadducees accepted only the first five books of the Bible, what was called the Torah. They were members of the priestly families, in charge of the Temple and associated with the occupying Roman power. After the fall of Jerusalem they seem to have disappeared as a force in Jewish life.

Because they accepted only the Torah, they did not believe in the Resurrection from the dead. In that early expression of Jewish faith, it was thought that when people died, they took on a shadowy existence in Hades. But the people of Israel gradually developed a more satisfying understanding of what happened to their loved ones when they died. They came to understand that if

God was a God of love and mercy then he would not condemn good people to live in the darkness of the underworld. In the last few centuries before Jesus, many faithful people were martyred for their faith. We have a rather vivid picture of one of these acts of martyrdom in our first reading today. These martyrs would surely be rewarded for their faithfulness. From the Book of Daniel onward and especially in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament there are many expressions of faith in the Resurrection from the dead. But the Sadducees didn't accept those books as being the Word of God. They came to Jesus with their minds made up and tried to make Jesus look silly by their story of a widow marrying seven brothers to allow his family line to go on in their children "At the Resurrection, to which of them will she be wife, since she has been married to all seven?"

Jesus, as he so often does, tries to open the minds of his hearers so that they can understand things in a new way. He talks about life and death differently. He makes a distinction between children of this world and those judged worthy of a place in the other world. The children of this world marry. But the children of the resurrection do not need to marry. The example that the Sadducees used was based on the understanding that we needed to marry and raise children so that what was ours could live on in them. Our life could only continue in our children and grandchildren. But Jesus tells us that the children of

the resurrection can no longer die “for they are the same as the angels and being children of the resurrection they are children of God.” Jesus talks about angels here because the Sadducees did not believe in angels either.

Jesus then appeals to the written Word of God that they did believe in. He reminds them that God spoke about himself as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. When God spoke those words to Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all dead. Jesus goes on to say, “Now he is God not of the dead but of the living.” The relationship of love that God has with us is not just for this life. In fact this life is only a prelude, a brief practice for what God has in store for us for all eternity.

As we go through life as a follower of Jesus we have to re-exam how we understand what we believe. The understanding that we had of our faith as children will not sustain us throughout our life. We have to find ways of reflecting upon our faith so that our faith can be deepened. The parents of the children who are going to celebrate First Reconciliation this week have been engaged in that kind of reflection as they have discussed with their children what it means to experience the forgiveness of a merciful God. They have had to re-exam their own images of God so that they could share the best images with their children.

I suppose all of us have to relook at how we understand death. Death is mysterious and we cannot pretend to know exactly how it will be for us or anyone else. Pope Francis talked about death when celebrated Mass for All Souls Day in the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome, where many of the early martyrs were buried. In his homily he said, Christians, with their identity cards, and safe in the hands of God, “are men and women of hope”. Using the analogy of an anchor, Pope Francis said, “our hope is in heaven, our hope is anchored there, and we, with the rope in our hand, support ourselves by looking at the bank of the river we have to cross”. Even if we can’t see the other side, we must cling to the rope, he said: “This is important, clinging to the rope!” Often, he concluded, “we will only see the rope, not even the anchor, or the other shore... but clinging to the rope, we will arrive safely” on the other side.

In a few moments the children who will celebrate First Reconciliation this week are going to take part in a ritual of commitment. But before we do that, we have the opportunity to meet some very committed students from St. Francis de Sales College. They are members of the Vinnies Faith in Action Group. Today we launch the St. Vincent de Paul Christmas Appeal.