

Thirty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November is the month in which we especially pray for those who have died. It is timely then that on this first Sunday of November we have readings from Scripture that invite us to reflect upon our understanding of death. Not everybody in the time of Jesus understood in the same way what happens after death.

Our gospel today takes us to a debate that Jesus had with people who held religious authority at the time. He is debating 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 foolish by their story of a widow marrying seven brothers to allow his family line to go on in their children. They asked the question, "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 the Sadducees 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. Part of that process is 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.

How we celebrate the death of those we love tells others a lot about how we understand what happens to us when we die. A Christian Funeral is much more than a gathering to remember the person who has died. That is

part of what we do of course, but it is before anything else an expression of our faith in Christ and of his victory over death. It is an expression of our hope in the promise that Jesus has gone before us to prepare the way for us to share in his victory over death.

Many of us have family who do not share the same faith that we have. It is important for us then to make known to our family the kind of funeral that we want. Every member of the Church has the right to a Funeral Mass that is celebrated with the Community of Faith to which they belong. Our funeral should continue to witness to those who gather to the faith that we have been given and have tried to live throughout our lives. Each one of us should take the time to prepare our own funeral. We may well need help to do that well. But we should not think it unusual that we are the ones who choose the Scripture readings, write the Prayer of the Faithful and choose the music that is sung at our funeral. And we do not have to wait until we are told that we have a few months to live to be able to do that. As we know too well, anyone of us could die tomorrow. But each of us has been gifted with the faith that we need to look forward to our death with hope as the moment when we pass from this life to life with God forever.