

Thankful for the Resurrection

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We have begun the month of November, a month in which we give thanks in many ways. In 2 ½ weeks we will give thanks to God on our National Day of Thanksgiving for all the blessings we have received from Him. At the end of this week, we will give thanks in another way for all those who served in our military over the years and especially for those who gave the last measure of devotion in service and sacrifice to us and our country. Last week Tuesday, was All Saints Day. Today, we Christians give thanks for all the saints who have gone before us and preserved and passed on the faith to all of us.

Some of those saints were named this morning and candles were lit for those who died in the past year and were members of this congregation. I am sure that each of you has a saint in your life for which you are thankful helped support and nurture the faith which you have in your life. I do too. I would like you to remember them at this time in silence and prayer to God for them.

We are also approaching the end of the Church Year when we turn our focus to the end of times.

One of the things is we consider is the resurrection of dead on the Last Day. On that day, all those who died, believers and unbelievers will be raised from the dead just as Jesus was raised from death. We all look forward to the day when, once again, we will see the saints including those we remembered today. The bodily resurrection of all mankind is an essential and fundamental part our faith. It will occur

immediately upon Christ's return at the end of the world. After that, will come the Day of Judgment. Proof of this is found in the Old Testament when Elijah raised the widow's son in 1 Kings 17:22 at Zarephath, the raising of the son of the Shunammite widow by Elisha in 2 Kings 4: 18-3 and a little-known story of the resurrection of a man thrown into Elisha's grave in 2 Kings 13:20. In the New Testament, Jesus raised the daughter of Jarius as related in Mark 5: 41-42. We read that Jesus raised the widow's son in Luke 7:15. And Jesus raised Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, as found in John 11:44. Matthew tells us that when Jesus died on the cross, Jesus Himself was raised from the dead as recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew writes in his Gospel in Chapter 27:52-53 that tombs of saints who had died were opened when Jesus died. And, after Jesus' resurrection these saints appeared in Jerusalem to many people.

When we confess that we believe in the resurrection, as we will in the Apostles' Creed, we are confessing what has happened in the past and what will happen again in the future. But, some people do not believe as we do. They see death as an end and not a transition. The life as if this life is the only life.

As you heard in the reading from today's Gospel, that included religious leaders in Jesus time who heard the resurrection stories, especially the one about Lazarus.

The Sadducees in our reading today, in the time of Jesus, were the old aristocracy, with ties to the temple priesthood that dated back to the priest Zadok, one of the high priests at the time of King David. They were the religious and social conservatives. They were usually the High Priests.

They had primary responsibility for the sacrificial system in the Temple. They were usually the majority of the 71 members on the Sanhedrin. They tended to associate harmoniously the oppressive Romans and their puppets, the Herods. They only accepted the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, Genesis through Deuteronomy written by Moses, as the Word of God. They denied the resurrection of the dead, as well as, spirits and angels. All this, and other things, put them in conflict with both the common people and the Pharisees, the other major religious party. It also put them in conflict with Jesus, whose proclamation of God's kingdom they regarded as a threat to their comfortable little world.

When Jesus attacked the practices associated with the sacrificial system, over which they had authority and were making money, he angered them. Since they recognized only the original five "books of Moses" as fully authoritative, and because there was no specific reference to a resurrection in these first 5 books of the Bible, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They believed that the resurrection was not only fanciful but also irrelevant. They believed that the soul died when the body died according to the Jewish historian, Josephus. What is really wrong here is that if there is no resurrection, then, there is no judgement – no rewards or punishments for life. Jesus made them angry when he cleansed the temple and cut into their profits from the sales of birds and animals. Jesus was pointing to the end of the sacrificial system when he did this. (Jesus would be the last and complete sacrifice. No other would be necessary.) Jesus was their enemy. They wanted to be rid of him so they planned to entrap him by

asking Him a stupid question in order to show what a ludicrous idea the resurrection really was.

Now, there is nothing wrong with questions. Questions are the basis of the scientific method; they are the basis of research, they lead to debate and resolution of differences and comparison of ideas. Questions were the basis of the Socratic method of teaching. Questions are what are found in a catechism by which we teach the faith. (That is what a catechism is – questions and answers.) So questions are good for causing us to think. For instance:

Where in the nursery rhyme does it say Humpty Dumpty was an egg? If money doesn't grow on trees, why do banks have branches? Did Noah have a pair of woodpeckers on the ark? And, if he did, where did he keep them?

Often times, people ask stupid questions. I know I have done that sometimes. These stupid questions are asked either out of ignorance or out of spite. Take for example these questions taken from actual cases in a court of law:

Now, doctor, when a person dies in his sleep, he doesn't know about it until the next morning?

Were you present when your picture was taken?

So, do you admit that the defendant had 3 children?

Ans: Yes. How many were boys? Ans. None. Were there any girls?

Doctor, how many autopsies have you performed on dead people? Ans. All my autopsies are performed on dead people. Doctor, before you performed an autopsy on the deceased, did you check for a pulse?

Ans. No. Well did you check for blood pressure of the

deceased? Ans. No. Doctor, did you check to see if the deceased was breathing? Ans. No. So, then, doctor, is then possible that they deceased was still alive when you performed the autopsy? Ans. No. How can you be absolutely certain, Doctor? Ans. Because the brain of the deceased was in a jar on my lab table. But, doctor, could the deceased still have been alive, nevertheless? Ans. Yes, it is possible that he could have been alive and practicing law somewhere. (My apologies to any lawyers here today.)

The Sadducees with a hypothetical case based on Deuteronomy 25: 5-10. The law they referenced was called the levirate marriage law from the Latin levir (“brother in law”). For the purposes of insuring the preservation of a family name and later to insure that land stayed within a family, clan and tribe, God stipulated that a man should marry the childless widow of his brother (his sister-in-law). The intention was for children to be born to this couple. The child, especially a male child, was also the legal descendant of the dead man and would inherit his name and property and retain ownership of the land in the family. He was also expected to care for his mother in her old age. The Sadducees carried their hypothetical example to the extreme by having a succession of 7 brothers marry the first brother’s widow after the brother before them died. Their question to Jesus was, after the woman died, who would be her husband in the resurrection? (She had been the wife to 7 separate brothers.) It was a stupid question and meant to embarrass Jesus.

Let me give you a modern example written by Ruth Casper in her book, *Homilies for Christian People*.

*A child is born through the new reproductive technologies. Donor parent one contributes the sperm to fertilize the egg from donor parent two. The resulting embryo is implanted in parent three, the surrogate mother, who carries it to term. The child is then given to adoptive parents four and five who are committed to raising it, but they are both killed in a car crash. The child, now a toddler, and is adopted by another couple, who become parents six and seven. Now at the resurrection whose child will this be? [This example comes from Ruth Caspar, O.P. in Gail Ramshaw, ed., *Homilies for the Christian People, Cycles A, B, C* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989), p. 539.]*

Jesus answers the Sadducees and us with some clear answers to these questions.

First, Jesus distinguished between two separate ages. The present age and the age to come. For the present age, God had created marriage and family so that children could come into the world, be cared for and humans would continue to exist and not become extinct due to death. God had a good plan.

In the age to come at the end of this time, there will be no need for birth as there will be no death. There will be no need for marriage. People will be like angels. People who are judged to be worthy in the age to come will be privileged to live in that age and will simply be called “children of God.” In other words, there will be no familial

relationships because they are no longer necessary. They will be a thing of the past. Will you recognize your mother or father or spouse or brother or grandma or grandpa or neighbor or friend? Yes, if they died in the faith. However, they will be saints with you, if you die in the faith, along with all the other saints in heaven.

The story is told of a man — let's call him Frank — who lived quite an immoral life. He lied, he stole, he cheated, and seemed to show not the least regret. Now it happened that Frank had one great passion, and that was to play golf. Whenever he was not involved in some underhanded activity, he was out there on the golf course.

Frank's death was sudden and unexpected. A heart attack took him — just like that! When he came through on the other side, he was surprised. First, he was surprised that he was dead. It was not something he had expected when he got up that morning. But Frank was also surprised about where he ended up as a dead man. It was the most beautiful golf course he had ever seen! The sky was bright blue, the grass was brilliant green, and the temperature was that of a pleasant spring day.

Frank saw three men together, and recognized them as some old golfing buddies, all of whom had died before him. He connected up with them just like before, and they went out together to the first hole. A wooden tee was already in its place, and it was Frank's turn to swing. He asked if somebody would put a ball on the wooden tee for him because he didn't have any golf balls. It was then that his partners looked at him with regret and said, "We've got this gorgeous golf course, but we don't have any golf balls. You

know, don't you, that this is not heaven? We're in the other place!"

The story demonstrates a popular misunderstanding. It depicts the next life as somehow just a version, better or worse, of the life we are living now. And so the ardent golfer ends up in an otherworldly country club, and because he lived a terrible life, he must spend eternity out on the links without a golf ball. A woman is a bride to seven husbands, but never has a son. A child with a roomful of parents. In each case, the mistake is made in assuming that the life to come is only an extension of the life we know now. Jesus says no.

The Sadducees showed the same misunderstanding. They imagined the next life entirely in terms of this one, and so they rejected any belief in the next life. It made no sense to them that the arrangements that characterize this life would not continue on forever.

Jesus goes further though and attacks the Sadducees for their lack of faith and knowledge of the very Scriptures that they believed to be the Word of God. He points to the Old Testament reading for this morning in Exodus 3 and the story of Moses and the burning bush. In that story, God says (notice this is the Word of God), "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses' father was according to Exodus 6:20 was a man named Amram. He was dead and so were the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet, God used the present tense to describe them as if they were still in existence. They were in existence... in heaven. While human relationships end with death, the relationship with God remains eternally. The Sadducees had not read the

Word of God. They were still living in their world and living without hope of the life to come and the resurrection that follows that. The resurrection is a reason for us to have hope.

Think about that poor woman that the Sadducees used in their example. She was married but had no children (did you notice that in the story?). In the life of a person of Jesus time that was reason enough to be sad. Then, her husband died. More grief. Anyone who has had a spouse die understands this kind of grief. But this poor woman has it happen to her not once but seven times! She needed hope in her life. She needed to know that God has a plan for salvation with includes the end of grief, suffering, and death and a future with Him. And, even better, more to come in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. She needed to see that Jesus turned her losses into victories. And so do you. While we may miss the saints who we remembered here today, we have the hope of seeing them again. The resurrection is all about turning our losses into victories. Victory over sin and the Satan, victory over suffering and victory over death. Knowing this truth. Knowing these promises of God, we are the most fortunate of people. We can have joy because even in sorrow, we know the best is yet to come. Our weakness will become our strength. And our futility, in this time, will become our strength in time to come.

Jesus was saying that there is a life today in this temporal time. But He was also saying that there is more to come and He wasn't just talking about going to be with Him in heaven after death, as wonderful as that might be. Jesus was describing the end of all time (also created by God with the

sun and moon). He was saying that on that last day, even though our bodies have died, like the saints we honored today, on that day, we will be raised from our graves, whatever form that takes – a casket, urn, the deep sea, or simply flesh and bones turned into the dust of the earth. In other words, there is still more to come on the Last Day when Jesus Himself comes. And, this is even more for which we can give thanks. Even more, because of the grace of God through faith, we have salvation won for us by Jesus on the cross. St. Paul makes it clear in Romans 6: 3-5, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in a newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Often times, our lives (in this time) really get us down. Often times, as Christians, we have doubts about the promises of God. We look at a body in casket or see an urn on a table at a memorial service. There is no movement only the stillness of death. The grave seems so final. You wonder, “Is this all there is?”

The same is true in our very lives. Worries about the bills, the kids, the job, our health, our parents, our retirement, the environment, the economy, the political scene, the morality of our culture. There is a lot to cause us to lose hope and confidence and joy. But Jesus tells us there is more. Birth may be the leading cause of death. Think about it. Without birth, there would be not death, pain, or suffering. And, if that is all there is, if there is nothing more, then what a

depressing way to live. Not so says Jesus to the Sadducees. (Can you see why they were called “SAD”? They had not hope!)

You can tell when you have answered a question well. There are no follow-on questions. The last verse of the reading today says, “Some of the teachers of the law responded, ‘well said, teacher!’ And no one dared to ask him any more questions.” They were wise and, just like them, we can learn from the words of Jesus today.

Jesus speaks to us today and says there is life. A good life. There is life after death, AND THEN, there is life, after life, after death. Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus is the reason for our joy. He is the one who has given us hope. We have been blessed to the “max” and for that we should be thankful. In this month of thanksgiving, we need to raise our hearts to God for all the things we have in this temporal time but even more so, in thanksgiving for the hope that we WILL live forever by our faith in Jesus. Thanks be to God and to His Son, Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer. To them be the glory forever and forever. Amen.