



# 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

## Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 6 November 2022

### READINGS

Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

### *Focus on what really matters*

It is so easy to become side tracked on the non essentials – the small stuff that might lead us to avoid dealing with the big issues—the truly important, bedrock issues of faith on which we should all stand and which convict us on a regular basis. What seems like it should be simple is actually pretty tough because of our limited human thinking, our imagination is often limited to the world of experience, it is earthbound. Jesus in this week's gospel readings tries to refocus his listeners on the things that really matter. The Sadducees have brought Jesus a hypothetical question to try and trip him up about resurrection. Luke tells us that they don't believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees were the oldest and most conservative of the major religious groups of Jesus' day. One of their big disagreements with the Pharisees and other groups was over the fairly new notion that there would be a personal resurrection after death.

The Sadducees denied this for a number of reasons. Today's Gospel talks about two of them. First, they argued that the resurrection was not substantiated in the Torah - the first five books of our Old Testament - which were the only books the Sadducees accepted. This is why Jesus uses the story about Moses and the burning bush as an argument against them. That story, Jesus insists, implies a resurrection, and, what's more, it's from Exodus, one of the books that the Sadducees did accept. But the other reason, the other argument, is an interesting one: The Sadducees said that the resurrection didn't make sense. They said that you could not think about it clearly, and that you could not understand it well enough to merit believing it. This is what's behind their question about the woman and the seven brothers.

Citing Levirate marriage procedures, they wonder how many husbands a widowed woman will have in the afterlife. So why ask Jesus such a question? They are trying to make him look dumb, and silly, by showing how impossible this "rising up" is. But instead, they are the ones who end up looking a bit silly, when Jesus points out that outside of the bounds and constructs of our world, in the afterlife, the rules we've set up, like Levirate marriage, won't exactly apply anymore... the rules we have set up for ourselves that don't have meaning, and the thing that matters is: we are children of God, not God of the dead, but God of the living, and to God, life is everywhere. This is why Jesus says: *“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”*

In the NT epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul confirmed this same teaching of Jesus when he assures the people of Thessalonica that in the resurrection the faithful would be united with Christ: *“As to the coming*

*of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed.”* Certainly, this letter addressed the doubts that many followers had about the return of Christ and the context of life in the resurrection. As time went on after the crucifixion and resurrection, the early Christians began to lose hope of the imminent return of Christ. They began to question the promise of their own resurrection to a new life. But Paul gave them this assurance: *“God chose you as the first fruits for salvation, through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.”* Like many of Paul’s letters, this one was meant to give strength, comfort, and assurance to the new Christians who were challenged in their faith by both external persecutions and inner doubts.

The question of what happens to us in the resurrection transcends time. Christians in all ages have asked similar questions to ministers before us and to themselves; just as the Sadducees confronted Jesus. In our technologically advanced scientific and medical world, the concept of a physical bodily resurrection is one that is dismissed by many. Clearly a belief in the resurrection of Christ is at the heart of our faith. It is our foundational doctrine, which gives us the hope and the assurance that we too shall live in the resurrection of our own lives beyond our mortal death. When we come to that state of resurrection, we shall be united to Christ in a state for which we have no foreknowledge. Through our baptism and through taking communion, we affirm our belief in Christ’s promise of a resurrected life.

We must not trouble ourselves, as the Sadducees did, about what laws would or would not apply in the resurrection. Like the Israelites and countless faithful people throughout the ages, we must believe in the resurrection. We must believe that, in the mystery of the resurrection of Christ, we are promised a life in the resurrection with Him and with all of the saints and angels who have gone before us. This is Christ’s promise to His followers throughout the generations.

*The resurrection does not solve our problems about dying and death.  
It is not the happy ending to our life’s struggle,  
nor is it the big surprise that God has kept in store for us.  
No, the resurrection is the expression of God’s faithfulness....  
The resurrection is God’s way of revealing to us that  
nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste.  
What belongs to God will never get lost.*

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Don’t you love how Nouwen brings our attention to the idea that resurrection focuses on God’s faithfulness? God keeps his promises despite our facing death and dying, struggles and unexpected turns in life. Resurrection shows us that God is in everything and he uses all things to his good. The last sentence says it all – “What belongs to God will never get lost.”

When I consider how many times I have preached funeral sermons picturing and imagining heaven as a place that is some kind of an extension of all that we hold dear here in this life. I would guess this is because our imagination is earth-bound. This material world is all we know. If today’s Gospel lesson is any indication, clearly we are not alone in that thinking. It certainly must have been true for the Sadducees who sought to back Jesus into a corner today. They only know what they know and aren’t willing to risk beyond that. It is clear they have placed their hope for immortality squarely on the shoulders of their children and their children’s children that if they live on at all beyond the afterlife, they believe they will do so through their offspring. If the next life is simply a continuation of what we have known here? Well, things could get pretty confusing!

So, Jesus' words don't necessarily speak to the mind which has been shaped by a scientific, proof-seeking age. His words do speak to the heart. For they speak of a God of life who does the unimaginable. If Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are still living, then so somehow must be those that we have loved and so will I be, too, one day. As for the Sadducees and their very good question today? They are right, of course, if God is bound by what we know here. But God is not. For in a world and in our lives which are marked by death, God is about something more. God is about Life.

I would like to conclude with the following questions for further reflection:

- ◆ Have you ever found yourself identifying with the Sadducees and their question today?
- ◆ What was that time like for you?
- ◆ How have you sorted out the important matters before us in our Gospel lesson now?
- ◆ What does it mean to you that ours is a "God of the living?"