

The now and the not yet

St. Brandon's

Job 19:23-27a; 2 Thess. 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

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There's a sense in which today's readings continue from the theme of All Saints Sunday and Rick's sermon last week. The difference is that today's readings seem to be more about life hereafter – Paul's words in our NT reading and Jesus' words in our gospel are clearly about life after death and resurrection, while our OT reading from Job hints at that (although it's actually more complicated than it first seems, as we shall see).

But before we get to that, why resurrection now? Surely we 'do' resurrection at Easter? And I think the reason is partly to do with All Saints and All Souls, which we've just celebrated, and Remembrance Sunday which is next week. So we spend quite a lot of time on death and resurrection at this time of year, and today's readings (and it's similar for all three Third Sunday's before Advent in the Church's lectionary) therefore give us an opportunity to think more about this. I wonder if it's also partly to do with the time of year. The clocks have just changed; it's dark and getting darker; it's cold and getting colder. We have nothing to look forward to but months and months of winter. And we can quite naturally get depressed. So here's something about resurrection to cheer us up! But mostly, I suspect, the reason we look at this now in the church's year is to remind us of this: that resurrection is for life, and not just for Easter.

So what do the readings tell us about life after death and resurrection? Well, it's obviously about the future. "In that age" says Jesus, immediately encouraging us to think in the future tense. "As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ", says St Paul, similarly encouraging us to think about the future. In that age, when Jesus will come back, we will not die anymore, we will be like angels, we will be children of God, we will be children of the resurrection. The Sadducees, who believed there was no resurrection, and also believed that only the first five books of our bible, the Torah, were the true scriptures, got an answer from Jesus about their belief based on a clear statement from Moses (the key figure in those first five books) that God was the God of the living not the dead (see Exodus 3:6). There *will be* resurrection and eternal life, as Moses told you, says Jesus to them. And, St Paul adds in our NT reading, that we will obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, Paul says elsewhere that we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18). Think on these things, and the privileges we will have in Christ.

Even our OT reading sounds as though it is saying the same thing. "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth", seems to be speaking directly and clearly about Jesus' return. But actually the Hebrew text is not at all clear, and Job's redeemer, or vindicator, could be either God or a person. We shouldn't make Job into a modern-day Christian, particularly since the themes of Sheol (a place of darkness to which all the dead go) and mortality are more prevalent than resurrection in the book of Job. So despite Handel's Messiah's rendition of that famous phrase, we shouldn't read too much into it. (Did you know, by the way, that "Who wrote Handel's Messiah?" is a quiz question that not everyone gets right apparently!) But what is remarkable about Job's statement is that it expresses his sure faith that, despite the poverty, illness and social rejection he had suffered, he would be vindicated, and that that vindication would take a personal form. So we are close, if not completely there with Job, to a personal redeemer, and to what St Paul and Jesus have to say about resurrection.

So all of this is meant to encourage us in these dark, cold winter days! There will be an eternal spring, if you like, to look forward to. Things then will be amazing, as we inherit the status of children of God, children of the resurrection. And the only thing that might discourage us is Jesus' statement that there will be no

marriage in heaven, and therefore presumably no intimate personal relationships such as we experience here – and therefore presumably no sex.

Well actually two of the most profound contemporary biblical commentators – Alan Bennett and Julian Barnes – disagree on this point. Alan Bennett is clear that no marriage in heaven means no sex. Julian Barnes is equally clear that no marriage in heaven means sex with anyone, as much as you want! What St Paul (who is rather more authoritative in these matters!) actually says about this is that the resurrection body will be raised as a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44), and what we can probably conclude from that, and from what we have seen so far, is that resurrection life, and the quality of the relationships we will experience with others, will be just fantastic. As the hymn puts it, “I know not, ah I know not, what joys await us there, what radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond compare”, (sex or no sex).

But. I don't think our readings will let us stop just there. St Paul is first of all quite clear that “the day of the Lord” has not yet come, and that all sorts of fearful things will happen before it does (and he probably didn't have in mind that Donald Tr ... no, let's not go there). His point is that we are living in the 'now' and not in the 'not yet'. He's not saying that the 'not yet' doesn't matter. But he is saying that in the 'now', we are called to get on with life and faith: “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us ...”, and may God strengthen your hearts “in every good work and word”. In other words, there's life to be lived now, faith to be exercised now. Don't be so concerned with the 'not yet', and whether you might have missed the day of the Lord, that you fail to make the most of the 'now'.

But even that doesn't quite capture all there is to be said. One of the things I think we experience at the All Souls service we hold, as we remember loved ones who have died and read out their names, is a sense that the veil between this world and the next becomes very thin. I think that is particularly so around the time of death itself. This isn't pretending that the person who has died is just in another room, but recognises that the one who has died really is alive, but in another order of being,¹ a new existence. And if we allow it, that other order of being, that life beyond the grave, can infuse our living now. I said earlier that we were encouraged to think in the future tense about the age to come, and I deliberately framed all of that in the future tense to make the point. But are we not *already* children of God? Are we not *already* children of the resurrection? Are we not *already* being transformed from one degree of glory into another? Isn't the 'not yet' already somehow present in the 'now'?

Let me give you one example. A few of you will have heard this before (and so the quiz question for you is when was it, and what happened next?!), but it bears repeating. If you have been watching Poldark, you'll recall from the first series that Demelza, a poor and somewhat wretched girl, is rescued by Ross Poldark, the main character and a gentleman, from a potentially violent crowd (a little like the woman caught in adultery in John's gospel), taken to an inn and fed, given a lift towards home on his horse (a little like the Good Samaritan), and is then given a position as a servant girl in his house. Gradually, the relationship between the two develops until Ross decides that they should marry. In many ways it's a complete mismatch, and the society of the time largely cannot cope. But for Demelza it is a kind of resurrection; this almost Christ-like figure in her life (he rather spoils that in the second series!) gives her an entirely new life. She is still Demelza, there is very definitely continuity with the old, but she is a new person.

But then this is not all one way – a kind of 'poor girl makes good' story. Ross Poldark, after they have been married for a while, says this to her:

¹ See Stephen Verney, *Water into Wine. An Introduction to John's Gospel*, London: Fount Paperbacks, 1985.

“Why do you think I married you? To satisfy an appetite? To save myself from being alone? Because it was the right thing to do? I had few expectations. At best, you’d be a distraction, a bandage for a wound. But I was mistaken. You’ve redeemed me. I am your humble servant. And I love you.”

And once the lump in our throats has gone, and we have wiped our eyes, we realise that for Ross too marriage is a kind of resurrection. There is a kind of death to self, and a rising to a new life of a different order which has been given to him through this woman. Perhaps that’s what marriage is about, at least partly and at its best, in this age, and perhaps that one reason why it won’t be part of the age to come.

In other words, we are given tangible glimpses, and quite possibly tangible experiences, of the resurrection life beyond the grave now, and need to let that infuse our living now. If death is to be no more, then we can live now as if death were not, and that should mean both a deep celebration of life, and a deep desire to see the world changed so that those who do not have much of an experience of life before death, are given the opportunity to do so. This would continue to recognise the separation between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’, but would allow the ‘not yet’ to impact upon and infuse the ‘now’. And living like that would mean that we recognise that resurrection is for life, and not just for Easter.

Amen