

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY – C November 11, 2007

The month of November is traditionally associated with those who have died. I think there are a couple of reasons for this. For one thing, on November 2nd we celebrate the feast of All Souls, which honors all those who have died. The other reason is a little more obvious: at this time of year the summer flowers have died, the leaves are falling, and the grass is growing much slower, if at all.

The freshness of spring and the warmth of summer are distant memories. And yet, in the midst of all these signs of death there is our expectation that the cycle of nature will begin again and that in just a few months we'll be celebrating the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, which comes very early next year, March 23. The earliest Easter can be is March 22.

So why am I talking about Easter when we haven't even come to Thanksgiving yet? Well, today's Scripture readings are all about our resurrection hopes. This happens every year at this time. On the last few Sundays of Ordinary Time the Church deliberately provides us with readings that focus on The End: the end of time, the second coming, heaven, hell, purgatory, final judgment. These are the themes that we find for the next few weeks, until Advent begins in just three weeks.

It's interesting that our Psalm today, number 17, is not very interested in the resurrection. This is common in a lot of the earlier parts of the OT, because the early biblical writers had a very limited, kind of depressing view of the afterlife. Their belief was that the dead lived in a place called Sheol, a shadowy place more like limbo, or a long, long sleep, almost a suspended animation kind of thing.

But later on, around the 2nd century before Christ, this began to change, and we see this in our first reading from the book of Maccabees. A woman and her seven sons stand up to the wicked king who is torturing them, trying to get them to eat pork, which was against their Jewish laws. Now, you wouldn't have to torture *me* to get me to eat pork, but this is obviously about something much bigger than eating. It's about respecting their ancestors and their laws and their beliefs.

The real point here is found in the little speech given by the one son, who says, "you are depriving us of this *present* life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again *forever*." So clearly we see here that at this point in history, people were beginning to believe in a much happier afterlife.

This idea continues very nicely into the Gospel reading. This is called a "controversy story", in which Jesus debates with some Sadducees about resurrection, or life after death. On this matter, Jesus sided with the Pharisees. We usually tend to think of the Pharisees as the bad guys, but in general they really were decent men who had a few blind spots. But they had a strong belief in some kind of resurrection.

The Sadducees are trying to trap Jesus. Since they accepted only the first five books of the Hebrew Bible as genuine, and there is very little mention of resurrection in them, they insisted that the idea of resurrection is not biblical. They come up with a tricky question for Jesus based on a passage from the book of Deuteronomy which says that when a man died and left behind a widow with no children, the dead man's brother was to marry her, and hopefully produce children.

They construct a highly unlikely scenario about seven brothers all marrying the same woman, one after another of course. All of them die, and still no children. Now this is one unlucky

widow! But finally she dies too, and the question is: if there is a resurrection, whose wife will she be?

Jesus is ready for them, of course, and by using a debating technique of his time, he argues that the Sadducees don't know what they're talking about because they don't know what resurrection means. First he tells them that in the resurrection, life will be completely different from anything they could possibly imagine.

Then, quoting from the book of Exodus Jesus shows how God identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If God is claiming to be the God of these three dead patriarchs, they somehow must be still alive, and therefore, Jesus says, the God of Israel is the God of the living. It might seem like a pretty flimsy argument to us, but apparently it was very convincing at the time.

Behind all this is Jesus' firm conviction that the God of the Bible is the God of the living, and the nature of resurrection is based on this idea of living and is God's gift to us. In fact, resurrection is not owed to us, no matter how good we are, or how many prayers we say, or how often we go to Mass, or how well we sing the hymns. God does not owe us anything. This means that resurrection is a *pure gift*.

So in November we recall those who have died. Last Monday evening we had the annual Memorial Mass, remembering the 108 persons from this parish who have died during the past year. It was obvious that there were feelings of sadness, loss and grief. But beyond these real and honest feelings there is also the hope that we will see our loved ones again in the resurrection, and that even now we are in communion with them, in some way.

This is a tough concept to grasp, the idea of eternity and our current participation in the Communion of Saints. I remember thirty-some years ago when I was in my early days of the seminary and working a summer job. One of my co-workers asked me, "What is heaven like?" I told him I didn't know, since I'd never been there, although it certainly was a place I was hoping to see someday.

But he persisted, wanting more information. I finally told him that my personal vision of heaven was not a place, but a state of being in which all our needs and desires are fulfilled simply by the ability to love God face to face. He looked at me like I had just tried to sell him property on the moon, and said, "You mean that's all there is? We just sit around looking at God?" I said, well, something like that. He just shook his head and said, "Sounds boring to me."

But the Communion of Saints is anything but boring. Besides all those canonized saints we're familiar with, there are also the unofficial saints, perhaps some sitting here among us or others we know or have known who have shaped our lives by their faith, example and encouragement. And it's not out of the question that some might find any of us here to be saints.

God truly is a God of the living, and Jesus, in fact, taught us how to live *and* how to be fully alive. He even said in St. John's Gospel, "I am the way, and the truth, and the *life*." Our job here on earth is to do the living. And as St. Paul suggests, we should be supporting, encouraging and praying for one another because these are important obligations for all of us as members of the Communion of Saints.