

Homily for the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

November 6, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: 2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14 (Seven brothers choose martyrdom with the hope of resurrection.)

Responsory: Psalm 17 (Lord, when your glory appears, my joy will be full.)

Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5 (May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God.)

Gospel: Luke 20:27-38 (To God all are alive.)

Our first reading today comes from the Second Book of Maccabees, which tells the story of how the Jews in Jerusalem fought back against the Greek kings who ruled over them in the second century B.C. A series of these foreign rulers attempted to impose Greek culture and religion on the Jewish people, forcing them to worship the whole pantheon of Greek gods and to abandon Jewish beliefs and practices. As these seven brothers and their mother bravely submit to torture and death, rather than violating God's law, they state their unwavering belief in *resurrection*. One of the brothers says defiantly, "You are depriving us of this *present* life, but the King of the world will raise us up to *live again forever*."

Actually, belief in resurrection was just beginning to emerge in the second century B.C., when some of the last books of the Old Testament were being composed. It's not clear how widespread the belief was among the Jewish people, even in Jesus' day. The two main religious groups mentioned in the New Testament held opposing views on the subject, because the Sadducees rejected any doctrine which could not be found in the *Torah*, that is, the first five books of the Bible, while the Pharisees took a more liberal view, considering the *entire* Old Testament to be authoritative.

The people confronting Jesus in today's gospel are all Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection. They propose a thought experiment to demonstrate the incoherence of resurrection as a religious belief. According to an ancient Jewish law, if a man dies childless, his brother is obligated to marry his widow and raise up children on behalf of the deceased brother. So, the Sadducees present a scenario in which *seven* brothers all marry the same woman, but all of them die without producing an heir. In the next life, each of them would seem to have an equal claim on the woman as his wife. So, if all of them are resurrected, what follows is an impossible situation, in which one woman has *seven* husbands for all eternity! The Sadducees think that this paradox *disproves* the concept of resurrection, once and for all. But, Jesus counters that it only proves how little *they understand resurrection*, and the true nature of eternal life.

The problem with this fictional scenario, the thing that leads to an absurd conclusion, is the false assumption that resurrected life is *just like life on earth*, except that it never ends and never changes. The Sadducees assume that if the woman is married to all seven brothers, *one at a time*, here on earth, then she must be married to all seven *at the same time* in the afterlife. But, that's not how it works. Resurrection is not simply the *restoration* of the same life that we had before. It is the beginning of an *entirely new life*. Contrary to what the Sadducees

presumed, our relationships do *not* remain the same after resurrection. And, contrary to what the Maccabean martyrs seemed to think, after resurrection we do *not* receive back the same earthly body that we had before, with all of our lost limbs restored and all of our fatal wounds healed. Those false assumptions about eternal life lead to all sorts of absurdities and contradictions.

Consider, for example, what might happen if our resurrected bodies *were* identical to the bodies that we had on earth, just restored to good health and immune to any further aging or disease. What *age* do you suppose our resurrected bodies will be for all eternity?" Will everyone be 29 years old, or some other arbitrary number that we consider the prime of life? Will each person get to *choose* what age they want to be? What about people who died very young? Can they be adults in heaven, even though they never experienced adulthood on earth? You can see how quickly this line of questioning becomes very silly.

Things get even weirder when we consider *relationships*, especially those which are defined by generational differences. For example, after resurrection, will people be the same age as their parents and their children, not to mention their grandparents and their grandchildren? How could any of those relationships be even remotely like they were on earth? Really, you don't need to dream up a bizarre scenario about seven brothers marrying the same woman to realize that relationships in heaven *have to be* fundamentally different than they are on earth. That's why Jesus says that the concept of marriage does not translate into eternal life. How husbands and wives will relate to each other in heaven is just as mysterious as how parents and children will relate to each other. *We just don't know.*

Jesus insists that we *will* be raised up to eternal life, but that our new life will be nothing like anything that we have experienced here on earth. He says that we will become "like angels." Frankly, I have no idea what that means, do you? It seems to imply that none of our earthly concepts about human life will apply in the heavenly realm. And, that leaves people of faith, like us, in a very awkward position. On the one hand, the Lord clearly teaches us to believe in resurrection to eternal life. But, on the other hand, none of the categories that we know from our own life experience seem to help us to make sense of this mystery.

Notice, however, that when Jesus talks about "life in the Kingdom of God," he speaks only about the resurrected person's relationship *with him* and *with the Father*, not their relationships with other people. Using a wide array of images and metaphors, Jesus describes heaven as a place of *communion* with him and with the Father, but he does *not* explain how this new and deeper communion with God will affect our relationships with one another. What seems to happen in heaven is what St. Paul prays for at the end of today's second reading: "May the Lord direct your hearts to *the love of God.*"

All of our human relationships become meaningful and life-giving to the extent that they reflect *God's divine love* for us. Even the covenantal love shared by spouses and the unconditional love between parents and their children are but a pale reflection of the *perfect* love of God. It is impossible for us to imagine how all of those earthly loves will be transformed when all of us are gathered, at last, in the presence of the perfect love which is their source. All our words and concepts seem inadequate to capture the mystery that awaits us in eternal life. All we know for sure is that *it will be glorious.*