

Pentecost 27-- Nov 10, 2019

Job 19, 2 Thessalonians 2, Luke 20

Perhaps the most difficult Christian teaching for people today to accept concerns the affirmation which we make every Sunday in the Creed about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Truth be told, however, this teaching has been difficult from the beginning, as our Scripture lessons today show. The gospel lesson tells us about an objection from the Sadducees, who say that there is no resurrection. On the opposite side of the question, the Second Thessalonians text warns against thinking that the Day of the Lord, that is, our resurrection to greet him who comes in glory, has already taken place. We will get to these objections in due time this morning, but let's begin with the Job's defiant statement of faith and hope, because this really is the root of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; ²⁶ and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, ²⁷ whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another."

Let's recall who Job was who made this statement and under what circumstances. He was a prosperous man, much blessed, when the heavenly accuser charged that Job feared God only because he was so prosperous and blessed. Let's see, the Satan said to the Lord, how he fears and loves you when you put him into my hands for a while! It's a penetrating test: do we love God for God's sake or only because we think to derive some benefits from God? There is a lot more going on in the amazing book of Job worthy of study and contemplation, but our text today shows how Job meets Satan's challenge. After he had lost everything and sat in mourning in grief and shock, his spouse urged him to curse God and die. With the hope defiant, however, he uttered these words which the composer Handel has made immortal for us in the aria from The Messiah: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after

my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God.” Job, by way of these words, does not believe that Satan’s cruel attack is the final word about himself nor the truth finally about God.

So this is what his belief in the resurrection amounts to: in the end the justice of God will manifest and redeem him and, moreover, he will see with his own eyes’ his divine vindication. His suffering body will be redeemed. Centuries later the apostle Paul expressed the faith of Job in the resurrection similarly: “the sufferings of this present age,” he wrote in the great eighth chapter of Romans, “are not worthy to be compared to the glory which is to be revealed.” Yet further centuries later, Martin Luther articulated this faith in this way, “there is a life after this life; and all that is not punished and repaid here will be punished and repaid there; for this life is nothing more than a precursor, or, rather, a beginning, of the life that is to come.” This belief in God who triumphs for us in the end is what we are confessing every Sunday in the Creed when we say that we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. We are saying that we believe in the God who has a good future for us beyond any future that we can imagine or predict, control or manipulate.

So what about those Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection? What they are saying, when judged in the light of the foregoing faith Job, is that there God is the God of the dead not the living, the God of the past not the future, the God of what is and can never be otherwise. Period! You see it’s really an argument about who and what God is. Is God the fixed and changeless ground or anchor of the way things are? Or is God the Dynamo who works all things to the end of the victorious coming of his reign and the glory of his creation’s redemption?

The Sadducees had a rationalistic objection. They tried to trap Jesus with a question about which of seven husbands would belong to and often widowed woman in the resurrection.

The answer Jesus gives further nuances what the faith in the resurrection is: we shall be changed! It is not a simple presumption and/or continuation of earthly life, in which every generation must reproduce in order to replace itself with the new generation in the temporal blessings of marriage and procreation. But eternal life with God confers what the apostle Paul calls a new and spiritual body, which Jesus today likens to the angels in heaven. In eternal life there is no need for temporal reproduction; procreation is passé. You see, once again, it's all about what God we believe in. Heaven is not a continuation of temporal life, but a translation into the eternal life of God: united with the Son in the power of the Spirit to sing forever the Father's praise. What else could eternal life be but a participation in this way in the eternal life of God, the triune God who is alone eternal?

But the Sadducees will have none of this. Why? They are in lockstep with the way things are and neither want nor desire this future of God with God in God! The Sadducees were the aristocratic party in Jerusalem in charge of the temple. They had a good thing going, what with all the Jews, already spread across the face of the known world, making religious pilgrimage to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. It was a lucrative business and to keep it going they were in cahoots with the Roman occupiers. It's no accident that the New Testament attributes precisely to them the conspiracy to do away with Jesus and his troubling faith in the resurrection. You see the faith in the resurrection or what is the same faith in the living God gives life to the dead disrupts the way things, just as the way things are depends upon the bleak finality of death. Those, however, who believe in the living God who gives life to the dead are undeterred by death threats, and undeterred disrupt the system of injustice predicated upon just as Jesus himself disrupted by overturning the tables of the money changers, quoting the prophet, "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples but you have made it a den of thieves." This act of

defiance triggered the conspiracy by the Sadducees to have Jesus put to death. The only response, when the Sadducees had succeeded in crushing Jesus by crucifixion, would be precisely the divine word of God spoken on Easter morning in raising Jesus from death.

This is the word of God that captures us and inspires our own faith in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. So in the power of Jesus's resurrection, we live in hope and expectation of our own. Already at peace with God by Jesus's resurrection, we are just so ill at ease with the way things are, knowing acutely and painfully that our resurrection is not yet, but something still future for us, so long as this world remains captive to malice and injustice. We Christian pilgrims live in this tension between the already of Jesus's victory and the promised future of our own resurrection. Therefore our Christian life is engagement, struggle, testing and trial, a battle not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities and spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places. You can see in this light why the second letter to the Thessalonians warns so sharply against any kind of thinking that our own resurrection has already taken place. It would be like claiming on D-Day that Berlin had already fallen. It could easily anesthetize the conscience of Christians, lull them into a false sense of security, and distract them from the urgent struggle at hand.

And this delusion evidently was a real temptation for the Thessalonians. The temptation is to think that we are already there, already arrived, already celebrating the victory. "We beg you not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." You might ask how a delusion like that could ever have gained traction in a world so profoundly troubled as our own is with cruelty and injustice. Unfortunately it is a commonly recurring phenomena in Christian history: faith in the Lord's promise to vindicate his servants suffering for righteousness sake

degrades into a personal private power peptalk in defiance of the hard and contradictory evidence of experience. It's an escapist religion. The second letter to the Thessalonians therefore warns against this false religious security that great trials and tribulations precede the coming of God's reign.

Our faith in the resurrection therefore amounts to this: because Jesus is risen and because Jesus is therefore the Lord who must reign until all enemies are subdued under his feet, we are to believe about our own selves that our lives in this body from birthday to death day are in his keeping and belong to him, whether we live or whether we die. Because we are united with Jesus in a death like his, so also shall we be united with him in a life like his. In this faith we courageously defy the cruelties and injustices of this life; we do not flee from the battle but we engage in it confident that nothing in all creation can separate us from the eternal love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be the glory forever. Amen.