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“God is not God of the dead but of the living” (Luke 20:38).

As part of a tutoring session this past week, my young student and I read the thrilling story of the “Seven Chinese Brothers” based on a folktale originating in the third century B.C. about seven identical-looking brothers who stood up to a cruel emperor during the building of the Great Wall of China. Each brother had a special gift that enabled him to survive tortures ordered by the Emperor, who thought he was only dealing with a single obdurate subject.

This hero story from China has its parallel in a second century B.C. tale of seven brothers who were tortured and executed during the Maccabean uprising against the Seleucid tyrant Antiochus, who was intent on crushing Jewish culture and faith by forcing its adherents to eat pork. The brothers do not survive but die in the sight of their mother proclaiming their belief that God would preserve them in the resurrection of the dead.

What is remarkable about this tale is that resurrection was a late idea within Judaism, supported by the Pharisees but rejected by the Sadducees during Jesus’ time because it was not mentioned in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The Sadducees, a wealthy, conservative group in Jerusalem, saw progeny, not resurrection, as how their memory would be preserved. They regarded wealth as a sign of blessing and did little to help those in poverty, which they saw as a curse sent to punish sinners.

In today's Gospel, the Sadducees mock the idea of resurrection with a concocted dilemma about seven brothers who all marry the widow of their eldest brother to insure progeny to his memory, asking Jesus whose wife she would be in the resurrection, since she had married all seven brothers.

Jesus dismisses their ruse and declares his belief in resurrection based on God's fidelity to his friends. It was unimaginable that God's justice and love would abandon the patriarchs and heroes of Hebrew history (including the Maccabean martyrs). As Jesus approached his own death, he no doubt trusted that he would also be raised by his *Abba*.

Resurrection is the central belief of the baptized. As we are joined to Christ through baptism, we share both his death and his resurrection. Christian life is about being in relationship with God and with each other, which is the source of our lives here in this world and in eternity. This is very reassuring, but it also asks us to do more in this world because we are believers. Because we do not fear death, we are free to live heroic lives. In fact, we are challenged not to waste this freedom by avoiding the risks of advocating for the poor and oppressed. We imitate Jesus by emptying ourselves in the service and defense of others.

We honor heroes for doing this. We canonize saints for living like this. The message is clear and thrilling. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?" (Rom 8:35). Because Christ is in us, we are called to live as he did, in both ordinary service and, when necessary, with heroic sacrifice.

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