Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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The interchange between Jesus and the Sadducees in today's Gospel could set up a great comedy skit. The backstory for it begins with Deuteronomy 25:5-6, a legal attempt to assure the continuance of a family name and inheritance. Deuteronomy legislated that if a man died without children, his brother should marry the widow to provide continuity for the family name and inheritance.

Added to that is the Sadducees' theological rejection of the idea of personal existence after death (an attitude popular among about 17% of the U.S. population). The Sadducees rejected the idea of eternal life on theological grounds. They believed that God's covenant with Israel assured rewards for the just and punishment for the wicked in this life. To them, hopes for an afterlife expressed a lack of faith in God's effective presence in history. Thus, with Ecclesiastes 9:4, they could say, "A living dog is better off than a dead lion … the dead no longer know anything … all memory of them is lost." Unlike contemporary atheists, their materialism was religious in nature.

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 6, 2022

2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14
Psalm 17
2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5
Luke 20:27-38

Now imagine today's scene. Contemporary screenwriters could have a picnic with it! (The background music would almost have to be "I'm Henry the VIII, I Am" by Herman's Hermits, whose bouncy "dancing" emphasized the ridiculousness of the song.) Allowing Jesus to push his critics a step further, the writers could have him ask the legal experts: "What if she gives birth to a son with the seventh? Is he the son of the first? The second? All of them? How many inheritances does the boy get?"

More seriously, what's really at play here, as underlined in the story of the indomitable Maccabean martyrs, is the meaning of human life. Is the meaning of our existence, like that of a dead lion, limited to the years we live as historical bodies? Or do our relationships with God and people past and present indicate that we are

more than a temporary composition of living, changing cells? This questioned the Maccabees' belief that remaining true to their faith was not in vain and was more valuable than their earthly life.

In typical fashion, Jesus responded to the Sadducees' challenge about eternal life with a conundrum rather than a straightforward answer, contrasting the children of this and the coming age. This age, what Paul called the realm of the flesh, is limited to material realities. In the context of today's Gospel, this age prioritizes the prolongation of family and fortune. Within that narrow worldview, seven brothers could "take" a woman as an instrument of procreation, inherited by one to the next just like the fields or houses that composed their material legacy. Ultimately, the entire process is nothing more than an impotent protest against the inevitability of death.

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According to Jesus, people who live in the domain of the age to come are like angels, immortal children of God. Love and relationships in this realm are understood as infinite gifts, unfettered by frantic efforts to possess or perpetuate an existence over which human beings can exercise no control. The fruitfulness of their love will know no limits of family, clan or nation.

Karl Rahner takes up this idea and suggests that in the life of the world to come, we will be lovingly related to the entire universe. Pope Francis' "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" expresses the same idea by explaining that the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ who draws everything toward the fullness that is our destiny.

Today's readings invite us to journey in reflection from the heroic to the ridiculous to the sublime. After the story of brothers who believed more in God than in death, we hear the Sadducees' fundamentalist objections to the idea of eternal life. Finally, Jesus invites us to open our imaginations to understand life in terms of where we are headed. Rather than depreciate human love or see it as utilitarian, he invites us to perceive the infinite value of every relationship. Francis elaborates on this in *Fratelli Tutti*, saying, "Life exists where there is bonding, communion, fraternity; and life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity."

The Liturgy of the Word calls us to open our imaginations and dream of all the love we are capable of receiving and giving. No possession or accomplishment can give us genuine meaning, no legacy will insure our future. While appreciating all that life gives us, Christ urges us not to identify with either the lion or the dog, but with the angels whose breadth of vision leads to rapt tenderness and free involvement with everything that exists. That's how we can rehearse for the life of the age to come.