

Life that transcends death

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As a parish community, we gather this morning in the midst of great sadness, with a deep sense of loss and a great desire to support one another at this time, especially Sandy and the family in their own grief. Your Priest and friend has gone from us—and so quickly, taken by such an aggressive illness that is tragically part of our human condition. The shock and grief are very real.

But as we gather this morning, we do so for the celebration of the Eucharist: from the Greek, *eucharistein*, to give thanks. And we do want, also to give thanks. We give thanks for Rob's life and ministry. We give thanks for his faithful discipleship; for his faith; for his pastoral and reconciling ministry; for his peacefulness and gentleness; for his openness and inclusiveness; for his friendship. We also want to join with Sandy in her own thankfulness for all the kindness and generosity, all the courage and care, all the many healings that there have been during these last three months.

One of the special things has been the gathering of people, especially around Rob's bedside during his final days. Family and friends came from many places as a sign of their love and respect. One of the really nice things was the visit of two people who began with Rob as students for ordination, and the way they were in touch with other students from those days—all anxious to be kept up to date about Rob's condition. It was a real expression of the bonds of friendship forged during those important formative years at St John's College, Morpeth. One can't pretend they were always easy times—living in community, with all the intensity of religion thrown in; but, for students like Rob, they were invaluable times, shaping them for future ministry—for life.

It was one of my tasks to teach them Church History. I think they endured that pretty well, and we often had a lot of fun. Where they did take the mickey was over my attempts to teach them philosophy. Back then, philosophy was my 'thing'; I even knew a bit about logic and various kinds of arguments. One type of argument—perhaps not the most attractive type—is known as *reductio ad absurdum*. It is about winning the argument by reducing the other person's opinion to the absurd. You win by making them and their view look stupid.

Now, that is what the Sadducees were up to in the gospel reading. For a few weeks we have hearing gospel passages that reflect the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of the time. What we have heard from Matthew this morning continues the theme. The chief priests and the scribes have already questioned his authority; now, they try to trap him with the famous question about whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. And when they could not stump him with their questions, they fell silent.

But then the Sadducees appeared on the scene to continue the questioning. They chip in with their convoluted question about the woman who was successively married to seven brothers. It's one of those questions you ask when you want to disprove an idea by thinking up a really extreme example that will make the idea fall apart—by reducing the idea to the absurd. The Sadducees were trying to disprove the idea of the resurrection of the dead by showing it to be absurd. In his response, Jesus tells them that while they might be quoting a particular law from their scriptures, they were in fact overlooking something far more fundamental in those scriptures. They had lost sight of a basic understanding of God that is there in those scriptures.

It is times, such as we are experiencing now, that cause us to think about our lives, our world, bringing us back to the fundamentals that orient us, give direction to our lives. How we cope

with death and grief, how we wrestle with the apparent futility of suffering, how we conduct our relationships, the kinds of priorities we have, the kind of people we want to be—all need to be informed and shaped by our fundamentals: what we understand of God from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, what we understand about the priorities of love and reconciliation, about the demands of justice and goodness.

In general terms, this is what we hear this morning of Jesus doing with the Sadducees: calling them back to a more fundamental truth in their own faith tradition. Jesus was wanting to take them (and us) back to the nature of God and to the nature of relationships. God's truth is always relational. Jesus was reminding them (and us) of the transforming power and eternal hope of that truth.

The Sadducees were a select party within Judaism; conservative and aristocratic, most of them held positions of power in church and state. Adept at political compromise, they were theologically conservative.

As fundamentalists in the interpretation of the law, the Sadducees put a question to Jesus which attempts to ridicule belief in the resurrection by recalling a particular Mosaic law and then citing an absurd example. The law stated that if a man dies and has no son, no legal heir, his brother must marry the widow and the "first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the brother who is dead"; thus ensuring the continuity of the family line. The Sadducees then develop an example to the point of absurdity by instancing seven brothers each of whom marries the same woman, but each of whom dies childless. In that case, whose wife would the woman be in the resurrection?

Their quibble rests upon a crass assumption that life after death would simply be a repetition or extension of life in the present time. This dubious assumption enables Jesus to respond. First, in the case of the risen life, he points out that we are dealing with a totally new situation—not just an extension of the present.

More significantly, the quibble trivialises both the nature of God and human relationship with God. The same scriptures that contain the law cited by the Sadducees, also speak, in a far more central passage, of God as the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". The description points to God's eternity as the living God and to God holding in on-going relationship even people who have died. God, Jesus says, is not a god of the dead. The idea is meaningless. Being the God OF someone implies relationship and relationship requires life—an on-going personal existence in life. So the Sadducees are wrong. Their understanding of God is wrong. Their understanding of relationship with God is wrong. Jesus is saying there is a love and faithfulness and life that transcend death, that has its source in the living God, and, as we know, Jesus himself will experience it soon enough.

And here this morning, in our Eucharist, we are bearing witness to, and celebrating, the faith that Rob is now experiencing that love and faithfulness and life that transcend death.

Jesus' way of dealing with the Sadducees' questions, and other questions all through the gospels, is the same. He presents people with fundamental truth—in a story, in a teaching—a truth that invites people to faith, to move into a new understanding of God and others and themselves.

When the Sadducees no longer dare ask Jesus another question, Jesus poses his own. He asks, 'How can the Messiah be David's son when David himself calls him Lord?' It calls into question people's limited understanding of messiahship and challenges them to take seriously what it is they encounter in Jesus—God's offer of life and relationship. It's what their questions try to avoid.

As we meet around this table, Jesus calls us too back to the fundamentals (fundamentals by which Rob sought to live and minister)—to God's offer of life and relationship, to the ways of love and reconciliation, to being people of faith in ever-deepening relationship with God.