

# Sermon for Proper 27C

Text: Luke 20:34-38

## The God of the living

There is an Italian legend about a master and servant. It seems the servant wasn't very smart and the master used to get very exasperated with him. Finally, one day, in a fit of temper, the master said, "You really are the stupidest man I know. Here, I want you to carry this staff wherever you go. And if you ever meet a person stupider than yourself, give them this staff."

So time went by, the servant would encounter some pretty stupid people, but he never found someone stupid enough to give the staff. Years later, he returned to his master's home. Even though his master was very sick, he still managed to say to his servant, "I see you haven't found anyone more stupid to give that staff". After a while the master said, "I'm going on a journey soon."

"When will you return?" asked the servant.

"This is a journey from which I won't return," the master replied.

The servant asked, "Have you made all the necessary arrangements?"

"No, I guess I haven't."

"Well, could you have made all the arrangements?"

"Oh yes, I've had time. I've had all my life. But I've been busy with other things."

The servant said, "Let me be sure about this. You're going on a journey from which you will never return and you've had all your life to make the arrangements, but you haven't."

The master said, "Yes, I guess that's right."

The servant replied, "Master, take this staff. At last I have truly found a man stupider than myself."

Maybe that's just a story, but it reflects the way many people treat death as a taboo subject. Everyone knows that it's going to happen to them one day but it's something people prefer not to think about or talk about. No thought is given about death and dying and its impact on them personally. No thought is given on how to prepare for death until it hits close to home and suddenly despair, emptiness, hopelessness and inconsolable grief fills their lives because they have never given any thought to the finality of death and what lies beyond this life. Like the man in the story, too many people know they are going on this journey but don't prepare for it.

On the other hand, people who have no interest in religion as well as people in the church want to know what happens when we die. Science can't penetrate beyond death to discover what happens to us. We can't interview anyone about dying, and what is beyond death. There has been an intense examination of those who have had near death experiences and experience bright lights at the end of

tunnels. What these mean and do these apply to everyone is anyone's guess. Are these just happening in our brains or are they more than that?

Behind all this interest in death is the deep down feeling that there must be more – that there is something beyond this life. There is curiosity. There is the desire to want to believe that our purpose is more than our years here on earth.

Some have grasped on to the idea that has become very popular that we will come back again and our soul is given to another living creature. Our soul lives on forever, reincarnated hopefully into a higher living being each time.

Others say that everyone is born with an immortal soul that leaves us when we die and goes to live happily forever in another better place. That immortal goodness in us is waiting to be released when we die and, regardless who the person is, that soul will rest in peace forever in paradise.

There are those who simply say that when you die, that's it. There is nothing else. "When you're dead, you're dead!" When your time's up that's the end of you and there is nothing else beyond your last breath.

The Sadducees followed this line of thinking. They claimed that there was no life after death – no resurrection – since it isn't mentioned in the first 5 books of the Old Testament. They enjoyed having a bit of fun with those who did believe in life after death so they come to Jesus with this hypothetical question about a woman who marries 7 brothers after each one dies. Pointing out how ridiculous the idea of life after death really is, they then ask with a smirk on their faces, "*On the day when the dead rise to life, whose wife will she be?*" Can you imagine the Sadducees smugly folding their arms with a grin of satisfaction, thinking, "Get out of that one, carpenter from Nazareth!"

Jesus comes back with two answers both affirming beyond all doubt that there is a resurrection and that there is life after death.

Firstly, Jesus says that in this life, men and women marry but those who are worthy to rise from the dead will not marry. They will be changed. Their bodies will become like angels. That means our bodies will be different to what they are now – we will have a heavenly body if you like. What that precisely means we aren't told but we are told they will never die. We aren't on a never ending merry-go-round of reincarnation, neither will we disappear into nothingness. God has prepared for us an eternal destination.

The point Jesus is making here is that you can't take what we experience in this life and project those experiences into the new life in heaven. Heaven is way beyond anything we experience here. As much as we might like to think we have some pretty good things here in this life and want to experience them again in heaven, Jesus is saying that heaven is way beyond anything we know from this present life. It is something totally new and wonderful. It defies description because all we can do is use words and images that we have from this life and they are completely inadequate when it comes to describing life after death.

It's like looking through a frosted glass window trying to see what's on the other side. All we can see are shapes and lights – what's on the other side will have to wait until we are able to see it all clearly with our own eyes.

Now to Jesus' second come back to the Sadducees. This time he refers to the books of Moses – the Sadducees considered themselves to be the experts when it came to this part of scripture. He says, "*Moses clearly proves that the dead are raised to life. In the passage about the burning bush he speaks of the Lord as 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is the God of the living, not of the dead, for to him all are alive.*" He points out that God does not say that he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as if they were dead and gone. Rather God introduces himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who are alive and well living in his presence. "*I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am the God of the living. I am the resurrection and the life.*"

There are lots of things we don't know about life after death and how the resurrection will happen and when it will happen. But we do know that it will happen and who is at the centre of the resurrection even if everything is a bit unclear now.

In 1 Corinthians 15, St Paul uses the picture of the seed and the mature plant. When you look at the seed that you are about to plant, to all intents and purposes it looks dead and lifeless. Into the ground it goes, there to await the miracle of germination. Down come the gentle rains and the warm rays of the sun and that dead seed suddenly and miraculously springs to life. Up it pushes through the soil as a new plant and at last when it is ripe and mature is harvested.

So it will be with our bodies. One day some loving hands will tenderly deposit the dormant seed of our lifeless bodies into the soil of the grave, there to await the miracle of germination, the wonder of the resurrection. And up we will spring as God's new plants, the same and yet different, glorified, deathless and immortal, ripe, mature and ready to be harvested and to enjoy his presence forever.

Paul calls Jesus "*the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.*" Jesus has opened up the way for us to inherit eternal life. He has been the first. He defeated death and all its terrors by his own resurrection and promises that we too shall rise in the same way.

Hermann Sasse was a German theologian who came to this country fleeing Nazi Germany. He became a great teacher who influenced generations of Lutheran pastors in Australia. His last message to the church and to the world is written on his grave stone – simple but profound words:

*"For those who trust in you, Lord, life is changed, not ended."*

One new day we shall awake to a day beyond all other days by the love of God. All trouble, doubts and fears will be gone. We will become "like angels" by "the God of the living" we are raised to a joy and peace beyond anything that mortal minds can conceive.

When that happens, the words of this sermon will seem trivial, and even the visions of heaven in the Bible will seem an inadequate description of the real thing. Now we see dimly, as through a frosted window; then we shall see with absolute clarity. Thanks be to God!