

The Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14
<i>Response</i>	[W]hen I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 17:1, 5-6, 8, 15
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[A]nd from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 20:27-38

The 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us to a topic in the Gospel of Luke about which many people have questions, namely: What happens after we die? What will the afterlife be like? What do we mean as Christians when we talk about the immortality of the soul, and even more importantly, the resurrection of the dead?

So Jesus is going to directly address that question, the question of the resurrection, in this Gospel text. So for this Sunday in Ordinary Time, we're looking at Luke 20:27-39. So I'm going to read the Gospel, and then we'll back up, ask some questions, and then see how it connects with the Old Testament and the psalm for this Sunday. Alright, so very famous story here—it's the story of the Sadducees coming to Jesus and putting a question to Him about the nature of the resurrection. This is what Luke tells us, chapter 20, verse 27:

There came to him some Sad'ducees, those who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the wife and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and died without children; and the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and

died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.”¹

Alright, we’re going to pause there for just a second to unpack the context of this before we look at Jesus’ answer. A couple of quick points. First and foremost, the Sadducees...who were they and why were they asking this question of Jesus?

Well, you might know from reading the New Testament and other passages, like in the book of Acts, that the Sadducees were one of the leading parties of the Jewish people in the first century AD. They were a small group, but they were very powerful and influential because they were tied primarily to the temple and to the priesthood. So the Sadducees consisted of a lot of the elite—high level, high ranking, very powerful, Jewish priests—who were functionaries in the temple, but who were also wealthy aristocrats in the city of Jerusalem.

And they were distinct as a Jewish group for a couple of reasons. First, unlike the Pharisees, which was the most popular Jewish movement of the day, the Sadducees denied certain beliefs that were common to the Jewish people—the first one being the resurrection of the dead. In other words, the Sadducees did not believe in any form of afterlife. They believed that once you died, that was it. Your existence ceased to be. So they didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead. They also did not believe in the inspiration of certain books of the Bible. They only accepted the first five books of the Bible, commonly called the books of Moses or the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And they didn’t accept what we refer to today as the historical books, or the writings of the prophets—like Isaiah, Jeremiah, so on and so forth. So they had a much smaller canon of Jewish Scriptures.

And so what they’re doing here is they’re coming to Jesus, and they’re taking a situation from the book of Deuteronomy, which describes what was called levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was the idea in the Old Testament law of Moses, that if a man’s brother died, he had the responsibility to marry the widow of his brother

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

in order to have children with her, so that his brother's name—and also the land and inheritance associated with his brother's name—would not pass away, would not be taken away from the family but would remain in the family.

So what they're trying to do basically is set up a situation where they mock the resurrection by showing that there was a hypothetical where this one woman married seven brothers who all died successively. And the question was, well, in the resurrection, whose wife is she going to be? Okay, and the reason they ask this question is not just because they didn't believe in the resurrection, but because when first century Jews talked about the resurrection, they didn't just mean what we think of as life after death or the immortality of the soul. No, no, no, no. For a first century Jew, the resurrection—by definition—meant bodily existence, the reunion of the soul and the body after death in a New Creation, in a new Heavens and a new Earth that Isaiah talks about in Isaiah 65 and 66.

In other words, the resurrection for first century Jews was essentially bodily. And the Sadducees rejected that, so they wanted to create a hypothetical situation where a woman, in her resurrected body, would be married to seven men in their resurrected bodies. And you can imagine the kind of problems that would bring. So that's what they're doing with Jesus. They're trying to trip Him up, they're trying to show the foolishness of the bodily resurrection by posing this question to them as a kind of dead end that He can't get out of, because they recognize that in many ways, Jesus shares the belief of the Pharisees, one of them being (obviously) the resurrection of the body.

So, as a general rule, you don't want to put Jesus to the test and you don't want to try to trip Him up, because He always wins. So we want to see how does he respond to that query, and what does it teach us about the nature of the resurrection. So in chapter 20, verse 34, this is how Jesus responds:

And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses

showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to him.” And some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

Awesome ending there. This is what you call an ancient mic drop moment, right? He just stopped the conversation and that was it. No more questions from the scribes and the Sadducees and the leaders of the Jewish people.

Okay, so let’s break down His response. There are a few key elements here to understand what Jesus is getting at. We want to make sure we understand what He is saying and what He’s not saying, because there have been some misinterpretations of this passage as well. So first point, number one. Notice what He says:

“The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:34-35)

What’s He talking about here? So the first point of background that you need to understand is that Jesus is referring here to the very common Jewish idea of two worlds or two ages. This age, referring to this fallen, present, sinful world of suffering and death, and then what they call the age to come, or the world to come. In Hebrew these two words were *ha-olam ha-zeh*, “this age,” and *ha-olam ha-ba*, the age to come or the world to come. And the world to come was the New Creation, the new Heavens and the new Earth, in which there would be no more suffering, no more sin, no more death anymore, because all things would be made new. It was described by Isaiah in the prophet’s book, Isaiah 64-66. The last three chapters of Isaiah are all about this new Heavens and new Earth. So what Jesus is saying is, in *this* world, the sons of this world or this age, we marry and are given in marriage, but in the age to come they’re not going to do that. In the New Creation, there isn’t going to be anymore marriage or anymore procreation. Why? He gives the reason.

First, because they cannot die anymore. So in the resurrection, there will be no more death. And one of the principal ends of marriage and procreation is the reproduction and the transmission of life in the human race to keep the human race alive as a result of sin and death. So because of sin, we all die. Because of death, people pass away. So procreation serves the purpose of transmitting life to the next generation. But in the resurrection, there will be no more death, so there won't be any need for marriage, which has as one of its principal ends, procreation—not just the union of spouses, but procreation.

The second reason Jesus says is, because they are equal to the angels and are sons of God. Now...this verse is a problem. I can't tell you how many times I've heard in popular American culture, people talking about someone who has died getting their wings or becoming an angel...or Heaven has received one more angel. And I know that some people mean that kind of metaphorically, and it's sentimental with all good intentions, but from a Biblical perspective, that is completely false. Angels are pure spirits. They're a different kind of creature than human beings. Human beings are body and spirit, matter and soul, body and soul composites. That's how God makes human beings, and so we're fundamentally different.

So when a person dies, they don't become an angel. When a person dies, their soul is separated from their body and awaits the reunification of the body and the soul in the resurrection. And from that point, from death until the resurrection, the person continues to be a human. So just as a caveat, we should never, ever, ever—Christians should never say that someone becomes an angel. And that's not what Jesus is saying here as well. When He says that they're equal to angels, what He's pointing to there is the fact that angels are immortal, that angels do not die, and, in Jewish tradition, there was also a very strong tradition and belief that angels did not marry as well. They didn't marry, they didn't procreate—I mean, they don't have bodies so they can't do it—but they didn't procreate and have children in the way that human beings who are mortal and have bodies can do. So they're equal to the angels insofar as they're immortal, they're not going to die anymore, and therefore there's not going to be any marriage in the New Creation, in the new life of the world to come.

Alright, so that's His main part. So what He's doing is He's showing that the Sadducees don't understand the nature of the resurrection, because they are assuming that certain earthly realities of this world, or this age, are going to continue in the new age...and they won't. There will be no marriage in the resurrection, so the Sadducees, as Jesus says in one other Gospel, "You are quite wrong. You don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God."

Now, however, He does try to meet them on their own terms, because as I mentioned at the beginning, the Sadducees only accepted the five books of Moses as Scripture. So in order to buttress his conclusion about the resurrection, He goes back to the Pentateuch, just like they did—they cited Deuteronomy 25. Jesus cites the book of Exodus 3, the story of the burning bush, where God appears to the Moses and says, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." And so what Jesus says to them is...you might think, "What does that have to do with the resurrection?" Well, He's refuting the Sadducees' idea that at death we cease to exist, that that's the end of our existence, by pointing out the fact that when God appeared to Moses (in Exodus 3), He referred to Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...even though Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been dead for a long time before Moses came onto the scene—for centuries, right? And yet God refers to them in the present tense, as being their God.

So what Jesus is saying here is, the reason God says, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" is because Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive. They're alive to God. They might have died, their souls might have been separated from their bodies, but they continued to live to God through the immortality of their soul. And, He also—He doesn't go on to say this but—the Jewish belief would be, that at the resurrection, all of the saints of the Old Testament—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, whoever—would have their souls and their bodies reunited to live forever in the New Creation, in the world to come, in this new Heavens and this new Earth. And that's why the scribes are astounded, because they never thought about that passage in Exodus 3 that way, and Jesus takes a text from their Scriptures and uses it to prove that the soul does continue on after death. So that is the essence of the Gospel text today, pointing us to the reality of the bodily resurrection and the reality of life after death, and also the reality of the hope for a New Creation, a new Heavens and a new Earth.

Now, with that in mind, we can go back to the Old Testament text. So what is the Old Testament text for this Sunday? Well, it's in the book of Maccabees—the second book of Maccabees, in fact, chapter 7. Again, this is one of those books that's in the Catholic Old Testament, but it's not in the Protestant Old Testament. But it's extremely important. The books of Maccabees contain the stories of the Maccabean revolt that took place in the second century BC. At that time, there was an evil Greek king named Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who basically was persecuting the Jewish people and trying to force them to become Hellenized, to adapt Greek ways of life, to adapt pagan ways of life and pagan customs. And one of the things he was doing in his persecution, was not just burning the books of the Jewish Scriptures, but forcing Jews to eat pork. In other words, forcing them to break the laws of the Old Covenant in the book Leviticus, chapters 11-12, that prohibited them from eating any foods that were considered unclean—the primary one being, the most famous one being pork or the flesh of swine.

So this particular chapter is describing the martyrdom of seven brothers and their mother, who refused to eat pork, who refused to break the law of Moses, and were willing to die—actually, not just to die, but to be tortured to death—rather than to be unfaithful to the law. And in the context of the story of this martyrdom, we have one of the clearest expressions of the ancient Jewish hope for the bodily resurrection at the end of time. So let's read it together. Unfortunately, in this case, the lectionary has actually cut the passage short, so it cut out a few verses in the second book of Maccabees. I'm going to read them to you. I'll read the whole text in context, just so you can get the sense of this very dramatic story of some of the first Jewish martyrs. Chapter 7 verse 1:

It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers."

Okay, verse 3. Now at this point, the lectionary doesn't have these for the Sunday reading, but I'm going to read them anyway, just so you can put the story in context:

The king fell into a rage, and gave orders that pans and caldrons be heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, "The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song which bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, 'And he will have compassion on his servants.'"

After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, "Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?" He replied in the language of his fathers, and said to them, "No." Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done.

Here's where the lectionary picks up:

And when he was at his last breath, he said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws."

After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

When he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. And when he was near death, he said, “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!

Alright, the lectionary stops there. 2 Maccabees goes on in the rest of that chapter to describe the martyrdom of each one of the brothers, and then finally the martyrdom of their mother. I’m not going to read all of it, but I encourage you to go and follow up on it.

What’s important for us, though, looking at the lectionary is this: this passage is chosen because it shows two things. First, the bodily nature of the torture and martyrdom of these ancient Jews. These are very, very brutal tortures that were enacted by this Greek king in the attempt to force them to break the laws of Moses. And we see here the radical and remarkable fidelity of these martyrs—of these ancient Jewish martyrs—to the law of Moses. They would not break the law of Moses for anything. They were willing to give up their lives. And in the midst of being martyred, we see the clearest expression of just how bodily the Jewish hope for the resurrection really was—especially in the martyrdom of the third brother, when they cut out his tongue and he stretches forth his hands so that they can cut off his hands, he says, “I got these from God, and I will get them back again in the resurrection.”

So what this reveals to us is that the resurrection of the body was far from just being the immortality of the soul. There are a thousand and one religions that believe in the immortality of the soul or the existence of the spirit of the human being in some way, shape, or form after death. But that’s not all that Judaism taught. Judaism believed in the immortality of the soul and the reunion of the soul with the body in a resurrected state in a New Creation for all time. And that’s what the Jewish martyrs are referring to when they say to the king, “We’re going to get our body parts back in the resurrection, but for you, there will be no resurrection to life” ...because as the Jews believe, the wicked would be raised, but they would be separated from God forever in a place called Gehenna or hell.

Alright, so that's the background to the statement of Jesus in the Gospel. And you can see the awesome connections here. In the Old Testament, we have resurrection and seven brothers. In the New Testament story of the Sadducees with Jesus, they pose a problem about seven brothers who died and the question of the resurrection. And Jesus uses the Torah of Moses and also the reality of the New Creation to answer their question and show that they really don't understand the mystery and the power of God and the truth of the Scriptures and hope for the future.

Alright, so what about the Responsorial Psalm? In this case, the psalm is Psalm 17, and it forms a beautiful bridge between the Old Testament description of the martyrs of the Maccabees and their hope for the resurrection, and Jesus' teaching on the bodily resurrection of the dead. Only a few verses are chosen from the psalm, but these are the ones I'm going to read to highlight it. So this is Psalm 17, a prayer of David:

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry!
Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit!
From thee let my vindication come!
Let thy eyes see the right!

Alright, so the first verse here is basically a prayer for vindication, a prayer for God to deliver His faithful, to deliver His elect and His chosen people. And again, if you skip down to verses 8-9, David says (and again, this is speaking to God):

Keep me as the apple of the eye;
hide me in the shadow of thy wings,
from the wicked who despoil me,
my deadly enemies who surround me.

So David's continuing to pray for protection, that God will deliver him from his enemies, from his foes. You can think here about the Maccabean martyrs and their need for protection from the wicked king. And then finally, the psalm ends with this beautiful prayer:

As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness;

when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form.
(Psalm 17:15)

So David here has a prayer where he is expressing his desire to see the face of God and to behold the form of God. And what the Church does is it takes the spiritual sense of that text as pointing forward to our desire to one day awake—not just in the morning, but in the resurrection of the dead on the last day—and to behold the face of God in glory, to see God face to face in the beatific vision. This is a powerful and beautiful Responsorial Psalm that bridges the Old Testament hope for the bodily resurrection, the New Testament teaching on the resurrection, with an expression of us as the people of God, desiring to see the face of Jesus...but also to see the unveiled face of God in the beatific vision.

Now with that said, there are two last questions I want to look at here in closing. What are we to make of Jesus' statement about the nature of the resurrection and why—this is the more important one for many people—why is there no marriage in the resurrection? I've been teaching Scripture for a long time now, about over a decade, and whenever we get to this passage in the classroom, a lot of students are really troubled by it...especially students who are married or who feel called to marriage or are maybe looking for a spouse. And what they'll often say is, "Well, if marriage is good, if marriage is holy, if it's a sacrament, why does Jesus say there will be no marriage in the resurrection? Does that mean I'm not going to know my spouse in the resurrection?"

I try to do two things here to help the students with that. First of all, just from the perspective of sacramental theology, it's really important to understand that not all of the sacraments are permanent. Some of them are part of this life and will pass away. So for example, the Eucharist or Confession or Anointing of the Sick...certain sacraments are here for *this* world, but they won't be in the world to come. And marriage is one of those sacraments. It's an earthly sign that gives grace, but it points forward to the eternal marriage of Christ and the Church—Christ the Bridegroom and the Church as His bride. And once we arrive at that eternal reality, the earthly sign is going to pass away.

But that doesn't mean that a man and a woman won't know one other—a husband and wife, I should say—won't know one another in the resurrection, because we also have a doctrine called the communion of saints, which teaches us that the union between human beings and...I'm sorry, let me back it up. It teaches us that our union with God will not only be perfected in Heaven, but our union with one another will also be perfected. We will have a perfect union with all of the saints, a perfect communion with all of the saints in Christ. And so, I like to give my students a quotation here. This is from the tradition of the Church. It's from one of my favorite saints, St. John Chrysostom—wrote a beautiful homily on the book of Ephesians, addressing married couples who had this question back in the ancient times as well. And this is what St. John Chrysostom said to the husbands that he was teaching about the resurrection and marriage. He said this:

Say to [your wife]: 'Our time here is brief and fleeting, but if we are pleasing to God, we can exchange this life of the Kingdom to come. Then we will be perfectly one both with Christ and with each other, and our pleasure will know no bounds'²

This gives us a great example of the fact that the ancient Church Fathers recognized that our relationship with and our communion with our spouses will not be less perfect in the resurrection; it will be more perfect, because we will be perfectly united to Christ and perfectly united to one another. But the sacramental bond of marriage will in fact pass away. There will be no more procreation. There will be no more reproduction. There will only be new creation. And this very point—this is the second key element—is why the Church has such an esteem for consecrated virginity and for celibacy.

One of the biggest questions people ask about the Catholic tradition is: Why are priests required (in the Roman rite at least) to be celibate (priests and bishops)? Why do we have religious orders where people take vows of celibacy? If human sexuality and reproduction and marriage are good and holy things, then why does the Church call some people to give them up?

² *Homily on Ephesians 20*

And one of the key answers to this is precisely the fact that there will be no earthly marriage and no reproduction in the resurrection. So that certain Christians, certain disciples of Jesus, follow Jesus Himself by living a celibate life, and therefore living now, choosing to live already in *this* world, the celibacy that everyone will experience and everyone will live in the life of the world to come.

You see this from another ancient Church Father. This is St. Cyprian of Carthage. He was writing a treatise to consecrated virgins, so these were women who had taken vows of celibacy and virginity. And this is what he said to them:

Virgins, preserve in what you have begun to be. Persevere in what you will be. A great reward, a glorious prize... are reserved for you... The voice of the Lord says, "Those who will be found worthy of that world and of the resurrection of the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage [Luke 20:35]." What we shall be, you have already begun to be. You already have in this world the glory of the resurrection.³

So what's Cyprian saying there? That people who live a life of celibacy now in this world—the *olam ha-zeh*, like the Jews said—are living signs of the eternal life of the world to come. They're living signs to us of a world where there will be not just no marriage, but no death, no suffering, no pain anymore, because God will have made all things new. And that's one of the most beautiful aspects of consecrated virginity and celibacy in the Church today, is that it points us to the fact that this world is not all there is. And that unlike the Sadducees believe, we do not simply die and then cease to exist, but that we await the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body in the life of the world to come. And of course that's what we say every Sunday in the Creed: We believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

³ Cyprian of Carthage, *The Dress of Virgins*, 22