



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

### **32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C**

***The King of the Universe will raise us up to everlasting life***

*Readings: Maccabees 7: 1-2, 9-4; Ps 16; 2 Thessalonians 2: 16-3:5; Luke 20: 27-38*

At first sight today's readings may seem an ill assorted group. A technical discussion in the Gospel about the nature of marital relationships is set against an Old Testament account of torture and persecution.

In the Gospel Jesus is confronted by the Sadducees. They are effectively the 'court party', the religious aristocracy, those charged with maintaining the cult and servicing the Temple. They are the religious establishment. They are committed to the Law. They reject oral tradition. They have little or no time for spiritual matters. There is no resurrection from the dead (here they differ radically from the Pharisees), no afterlife to look forward to. There are no such things as angels or spiritual dominions. Like many of the materially and constitutionally well placed, here and now is what matters to them.

They suspect Jesus, in spite of His many run-ins with the Pharisees, of believing in the Resurrection and are keen to flush Him out and worst Him in debate. So they set Him a problem – and it's a cute one. The example they use is an *ad absurdum*. The poor bride gets through seven unlucky brothers without issue

so none of them have special claim on her post mortem. Whose is she then? You can imagine this puzzle being rolled out with much supercilious smirking.

The puzzle is not so bizarre to a first century Jew as to us. He will know well the story of the Book of Tobit. Tobit contains the story of the lovely Sarah who is widowed seven successive times on her wedding nights. It contains the encounter of her final and surviving husband, Tobias, with the Archangel Raphael and it has much to say about the care of the dead. Written probably a few decades before the Sadducees came into being in 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, it contains much that would be risible to the establishment non-believers.

Jesus then explains to them the nature of the Risen life. And here we will either rejoice or be sad. In the afterlife there is no marriage. For the unhappily married this will come as a blessed relief. To others it will be a disappointment. But it is what we say at the altar when we get hitched..... 'til death us do part'. That is acknowledgement of the mortal reality but also that the physical union, that has fulfilled our biological drive and our procreation and our earthly need for companionship, is now transcended by a greater dynamic and eternal union with all the faithful in Christ. Heaven is different.

Jesus then goes on to deal with the other implications too. We will be like angels. We are children of God. When the Scriptures speak of the God of the Patriarchs, they do so as of living beings. God is God of the Living not of the dead. The great 'I AM' is the fountainhead of life and sustains us in being. The mortal realities and fallibilities are transformed into eternal being. There is both personal continuity and radical change.

If the Sadducees want something to chew on they can chew on that.

One of the ironies of this encounter is that the Sadducees originated in the wake of the Maccabean Revolt in the decade 170-160 B.C. In today's Old Testament reading we hear a powerful snippet of the great persecution leading to the revolt. When one of the imperial successors of Alexander the Great decided to impose paganism on Judaea the penalties for faithfulness were severe. As the Temple was rededicated to Zeus, cult prostitution and Dionysian rites performed, copies of the Law destroyed and Jews made to bow the knee to foreign idols, the great revolt began. This one family, recorded in today's reading, have seven sons, seven brothers, martyred for refusing to collaborate with the state, refusing to deny the sovereignty of the one true God, refusing to bend to evil.

The witness of each one of them is to rely on the mercy of God and reject the power of man. At each day the tortured and persecuted men proclaim their belief in the Resurrection from the dead. Their mother encourages them to hold fast to the Faith. 'Accept death so that in God's mercy I will get you back again with your brothers.' One brother dies offering his tortured limbs sure that he will receive his body wholly restored at the Resurrection. Another proclaims, 'The King of the Universe will raise us up to an everlasting life because we have kept his laws'.

The witness of these times could not be a more eloquent affirmation of the Resurrection. Indeed the Maccabean witness confirms some major doctrinal teachings of the Church –

Prayer for the dead to free the dead from sin

Merits of the martyrs

Intercession of the saints

Resurrection of the dead

Specific mention of creation ex nihilo (II Maccabees 7:28)

(It is for these reasons that Protestant reformers were so keen to remove these portions of the Bible.)

Not long after the courageous Maccabean revolt had restored religious freedom to Israel the Sadducees insinuated themselves in charge of the Temple and became collaborators with successive monarchies. They were the establishment and their beliefs were correspondingly convenient and reductionist. Today's argument with Jesus lifts the lid on the great teachings of the Faith and blows away the shabby and implausible compromises of state religion. The real Church is seldom in step with the culture and for this, as for our forebears, there is both a temporary cost and an eternal reward.

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