

HEARERS OF THE WORD

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

Now he is God not of the dead but of the living

Luke 20:27 Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus 28 and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. 29 Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; 30 then the second 31 and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. 32 Finally the woman also died. 33 In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

Luke 20:34 Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 35 but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. 36 Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.

37 And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. 38 Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The dispute here is part of a series of disputes at this point in the Gospel. In that context the authority of Jesus is challenged (20:1-7); a trick question about paying taxes to Caesar is posed (20:20-26); and finally, Jesus goes on the attack, presenting a puzzling issue from a messianic psalm (20:41-44).

Within that chain of arguments, the present text about the resurrection finds its place. Compare Mk 12:18-27 and Matthew 22:23-33 for significant differences.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a dispute, with a typically rabbinical style of argument, pitting one biblical passage against another. The quotation from Exodus is a valid counter argument only because Jesus denies the premise that in the next life there will be marriage at all. The Exodus quotation—in the present tense—is read to say that in God’s own eyes Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are *still alive to him*.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) The technical term for the practice described in the reading is levirate marriage (*levir* is the Latin for brother-in-law). It is discussed in Gen 38 (a famous case, with a disturbing illustration) and in Deut 25:5-10 (and possibly also in Ruth 4). The basic principle behind the regulation is that a widow is forbidden to remarry outside her deceased husband’s family (probably to prevent alienation of property).

When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. (Deuteronomy 25:5–6; the whole passage as far as v.10 is worth reading).

However, Lev 18:16 and 20:21 totally prohibit marriage between a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law (historically important for the marriage of Henry VIII to his brother’s fiancée, Catherine of Aragon). The rabbis resolved the conflict by claiming that the general principle is given in Leviticus while the law in Deuteronomy applies only when a married man dies childless.

Thought for the day

When core ritual practices undergo change, this indicates a major shift in worldview. A good example for today is how we conduct funerals. There was a traditional pattern which is now breaking down, even if slowly. The tradition reflected convictions: prayer for the dead, hope of eternal life, fear of judgement and so forth. The current “customisation” of funerals tells us that such a world of meaning no longer holds. What do people *really* think happens when we die? And yet, hope in the faithfulness of God, who raised Jesus is really at the centre of Christian faith from the very start. In any case, we’re all in for a surprise!

Prayer

Our loving God, you raised Jesus from the dead, the first fruits of all who have fallen asleep. Strengthen our hope in your abundant gift. Amen.

(ii) But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations. (Exodus 3:13–15)

(iii) The first real mention of the resurrection of the dead in the Hebrew Bible is found in the book of Daniel:

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting

contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase.” (Daniel 12:1–4)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. (Luke 24:1–12 NRSV)

ST PAUL

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised (1Corinthians 15:12–16)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 27 Since the time of the writing of Daniel, faith in the resurrection had become a standard teaching among groups such as the Pharisees. However, more traditionalist groups such as the Sadducees clung to the older conviction that there was no real afterlife.

Verse 28 The law of levirate marriages is recounted as the basis for the case.

Verse 29 A very special case is given (the book of Tobit is based on a popular folktale very like the story here). The key element is childlessness.

Verse 32 The case for analysis is completed with the death of the woman herself.

Verse 33 The question presented is meant to land the interlocutor in a contradiction: the woman cannot be the wife of seven brothers and therefore there is no resurrection of the dead. Looked at closely, the argument has a great deal less cogency that might appear on the surface. Firstly, the question seems to have only a tenuous link with the law of levirate marriage. The very same “contradiction” of polyandry would apply in the case of widow marrying any number of unrelated spouses. The levirate law seems to add colour and suspense but not substance to the argument. Secondly, the question presumes that marriage will be part of the life to come. This is the assumption which Jesus denies, precisely because the two ages differ.

Verse 34 In these two verses the legalistic, largely specious, basis of the argument is rejected. The picture of the life to come is mistaken and so the two different ages require appropriately different dispensations. In all, four arguments for the resurrection are offered here: (i) marriage won’t count; (ii) in the new age, radical non-existence is impossible; (iii) God speaks of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as if they were alive; (iv) God is a God of the living.

Verse 35 There is no disparagement of marriage here: simply the conviction that categories of this age are inadequate for the age to come.

Verse 36 This verse is a considerable expansion of Mark’s: *For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven* (Mark 12:25–26). The puzzle is the phrase “anymore”. It seems to mean that those who have died have entered “that age” and so resemble angels and may be called children of the resurrection. A second, more radical death into total non-existence or perhaps hell is impossible on account of their new state, already described in vv. 34-35. The idea of a second death is found in the book of Revelation (Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

Verse 37 This argument is from Scripture. In God’s own words—not *I was* but *I am* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the patriarchs live before God.

Verse 38 The God of the living—perhaps a hint at this verse from Deuteronomy: *See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god beside me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.* (Deuteronomy 32:39.) The concluding verses, more gentle than in Mark, are omitted in the lectionary: *Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” For they no longer dared to ask him another question.* (Luke 20:39–40).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The question of the Sadducees suggests that our status here in this life influences how we will be in the afterlife. The reply of Jesus affirms that we are important not because of any “status” we might have but because we are children of God. Recall moments when you saw your, or the worth of another, as something other than worldly status.
2. A common tactic in an argument is to make fun of the position of another. Then one does not have to take seriously the view being expressed. Have you ever found yourself doing this? Have you experienced others doing it with you? What were the effects of such an attitude? Is there life here? If not, where have you found a fuller life?
3. Jesus used the phrase “children of the resurrection” to describe his followers because we believe in something that cannot be proven. Life can sometimes present us with that kind of a challenge—an invitation to believe in things we cannot prove: another person, a cause, the value of a course of action, etc. What has been your experience of believing and acting on this kind of faith?

PRAYER

God of all the living, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ you have given us the life which even death cannot destroy.

Remember your unshakable promise and strengthen us to live in this world as your new creation.

We make our prayer though our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Now may the Lord direct your hearts toward the love of God and the endurance of Christ

2 Thess 2:16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, 17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good thing you do or say.

2 Thess 3:1 Finally, pray for us, brothers and sisters, that the Lord’s message may spread quickly and be honoured as in fact it was among you, 2 and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil people. For not all have faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. 4 And we are confident about you in the Lord that you are both doing—and will do—what we are commanding. 5 Now may the Lord direct your hearts toward the love of God and the endurance of Christ.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is both a prayer and appeal for prayer. The tone of being under stress may speak to us today, especially in the poignant phrase “not all have faith.”

KIND OF WRITING

This is a letter of exhortation, with the usual features, even though it is likely to be *not* by Paul himself (see last week’s notes for the details). The lectionary offers the end of the *peroratio* combined with the start of the *exhortation*. Both parts are about prayer.

2 Thessalonians is closely modelled on 1 Thessalonians, even showing the unusual second thanksgiving. This similarity might suggest the same author but differences in teaching alert us a different

context. For instance, the teaching on the second coming is very different.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

If the letter is by Paul himself, the context must be shortly after 1 Thessalonians.

If not by Paul—as seems probable—the context is second generation Paulinism. As such, it is a general letter under the guise of being a letter to the Thessalonians. The precise context is a time of harsh persecution (see 2 Thess 1:4, 6 and 3:2-3). The author seems to be aware of a collection of Paul’s letters and even of letters circulating which are not by Paul. (See below under Related Passages). The author hopes the recipients will not veer from the received traditions, indicating a period of consolidation.

RELATED PASSAGES

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or *by letter, as though from us*, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2)

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, *either by word of mouth or by our letter*. (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

Now may God our Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we do for you, so that your hearts are strengthened in holiness to be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 16 The full context for this prayer is vv. 13-17. The prayer is very like the one in 1 Thess 3:11-13. Two affirmations are made: the Thessalonians are loved and graced. Comfort is the frequent word *paraklēsis*, literally to be alongside, and then meaning encouragement, comfort etc. Thus the writer

evokes the foundational experience of the recipients.

Verse 17 The comfort (encourage) word is repeated. Strengthen means “to firmly fix, to establish firmly, to make firm”, so quite a forceful expression. Not merely external conformity but internal conviction is required.

Verse 1 The full section is 3:1-15. Vv. 1-2 are a command to prayer; vv. 3-4 are affirmations of constancy; v. 5 is a prayer-wish. It is the proclamation which counts, not so much the church. “Spread quickly” is literally “run.” Message is literally “the word (of the Lord).”

Verse 2 The appeal may very well be a conscious echo of: *that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company* (Romans 15:31-32) Cf. 1 Thess 2:25.

Verse 3 The faithfulness of the Lord / of God is central to both Old Testament and New Testament faith. These verses look forward to vv. 6-15. Being rescued from the evil (one) is found elsewhere: Matt 13:19, 39; 1 John 2:13-14. NB: *And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.* (Matthew 6:13)

Verse 4 Cf. vv. 7-9. The combination of affirmation (present indicative) and command (future indicative) is Pauline.

Verse 5 This prayer closely resembles 1 Thess 3:11-13 (see above). This prayer is for their hearts, that is, the inner reality of the church. The inner life of the church is the *love of God* and the *steadfastness of Christ*. The Greek for the latter could mean either steadfastness of or from Christ; most likely both meanings are intended.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Not all have faith: reflect on your own times of “unfaith” — how did it happen? How did you emerge from it? What does faith mean to you today?
2. “Heart” in our reading points to our deepest inner selves. What is my own heartfelt need of encouragement, endurance and direction?

PRAYER

Ever faithful and loving God, your constancy is our hope and from your faithfulness we draw our strength. Guide our hearts towards love of you and give the endurance of Christ himself. Amen.

Topics	Letter	Speech
1:1-2	<i>Letter opening</i>	
1:3-12	Thanksgiving	Introduction
2:1-2	Body of the letter	Topics announced
2:3-15		Proof
2:16-18		Peroratio
3:1-15		Exhortation
3:16-18	<i>Letter ending</i>	

The King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life

2 Macc 7:1 It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and thongs, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. 2 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 ancestors."

9 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."

10 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, 11 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." 12 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.

13 After he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. 14 When he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!"

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Although only in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), the account is a significant moment in the gradual emergence of Jewish faith in the resurrection in the life to come. Originally, Israelites seem to have believed in God for this life only. The first real mention of resurrection meaning life after death is to be found in Daniel 12. The context is important. A successor of Alexander the Great, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 176-164), initiated a thorough and truly terrible persecution of the Jews. It was he who committed sacrilege in the Temple, leading eventually to its necessary purification and rededication, celebrated in the feast of Hanukkah. The sources for this persecution are precisely the book of Daniel and the first two books of the Maccabees.

The lectionary—perhaps for the sake of brevity or to spare us a very gruesome scene—limits itself to vv. 1-2 and 9-14. However, to get the full horror of the story, one should read the missing verses.

KIND OF WRITING

This is history but, as always in the Bible, history at the service of theology. The history is partly political—how to survive a vicious persecution. It is also naturally theological, as we see in these affirmations of faith which make up the religious message of 2 Macc 7:6, 9, 21-23.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

2 Maccabees is a much shorter work than 1 Maccabees and consists of a retelling of material in the first book in the form of a condensed version of the revolt and two letters. The two letters are found at the start of the book, 1:1-10a and 1:10b-2:18. The rest of the book tells of no fewer than three attacks on Jerusalem:

- 3:1-40 Seleucus IV
- 4:1-10:9 Antiochus IV Epiphanes
- 10:10-15:36 Antiochus V Eupater

To get the feel of what was at stake, it would be useful to cast an eye over chapter 6 which recounts the suppression of Judaism. To appreciate the full force of the excerpt in the lectionary, it would help to read all of chapter 7.

RELATED PASSAGES

Cf. Daniel 12:1-4 in the Gospel notes.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 While this is the sort of thing Antiochus IV would do, the symbolic number seven makes one think we are dealing with an exemplary tale rather than with a real event with actual reported speeches. The dietary laws, forbidding among other things pig's flesh, were put in place precisely to prevent assimilation and loss of faith. The mother offers a mother's insight vv. 21-23 (see above), but her presence both increases the pathos and acts as an *a fortiori* argument (if a woman can be so brave etc.). Antiochus is the king in question.

Verse 2 One of the brothers speaks and makes plain the consistent stance of all.

The reaction to him is immediate, graphic and gruesome.

Verse 9 This is another brother speaking (perhaps not so clear from the lectionary passages). He affirms both faith in the resurrection and in God's justice. In reality, these are inseparable. Martyrdom—the test case of faith—gave rise to a question: when will God show justice to those who have been faithful to him to the point of death? Precisely to be able to continue to speak of God as just, the Jews of that time expanded their religious vision to include resurrection, that is, the just God's faithful response to those who have been utterly faithful to him. Note the contrast between the King of the universe and king Antiochus.

Verses 10-11 These verses make clear that at least in Maccabees, resurrection is understood as bodily resuscitation. This is in contrast with the developed teaching found in 1 Corinthians 15. Just like the mother later in the chapter, the teaching of the resurrection is based on the power of God as creator of all.

Verse 12 In this way, even the persecutors bear witness to the faith and courage of the brothers.

Verse 13 A fourth brother is now brought forward.

Verse 14 Faith in the resurrection is again affirmed, in terms resembling the teaching of Daniel 12 with the one difference that the wicked do not rise even to be judged. Evil doers simply cease to exist and are annihilated, it would appear.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The most persecuted religion at present in the world is Christianity. A prayer of solidarity and support for our brothers and sisters would be a good expression of our all belonging in the one body of Christ.
2. Even on a lesser scale, it is hard to be a Christian and, from time to time, we are asked to bear witness to our faith. Go back over your own experience and call to mind any recent "opportunities."

PRAYER

Living God, from you comes the mysterious gift of life and, when we die, the even more mysterious gift of life with you forever. Strengthen our faith in you, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the living, that we shall be like you through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

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

READINGS 1 AND 3

Given the topic in the Gospel, no more fitting reading could be chosen. From 2 Maccabees, it is the creator God who brings to life; in Luke, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Thus, creation and covenant are brought together.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 16 is a psalm of exemplary trust in God. It is read in the New Testament to refer even to the resurrection of Jesus: *Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.'* This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. (Acts 2:31-32.) In our liturgy, the response captures the message: *I shall be filled, when I awake, with the sight of your glory, O Lord.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14

Why believe in life after death? According to this reading: only then can we speak of God as truly faithful to those faithful to him.

Second reading

2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5

The first part of the reading is a prayer, which we can make our own. The second part reveals tensions and rivalries, i.e. totally normal for a Christian community.

Gospel

Luke 20:27-38

The Sadducees were conservatives who did not believe the relatively new teaching on the resurrection. Listen to how Jesus replies to them.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 7 November

St Willibord, bishop and missionary

Titus 1:1-9

Writing some generations after Paul but in his name, the writer gives a picture of emerging ministries. What qualities do we look for in our pastors?

Luke 17:1-6

Our Gospel is made up of three brief teachings. The expression “little ones” means, in the context, those just beginning the Christian life.

Tuesday 8 November

Titus 2:1-8, 11-14

We may smile (or otherwise!) at some of the time-bound advice given here, but behind it all is a vision of life transformed by the Good News of Jesus: *grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race.*

Luke 17:7-10

This passage is unique to Luke. It seems to be aimed at emerging “clergy” who feel important or, as we say, are losing the run of themselves. It should be read in conjunction with a contrasting passage in Luke 22:24-27 (NB).

Wednesday 9 November

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica



Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12

Ezekiel offered the suffering people an extraordinary vision of life and healing flowing from God’s presence. The picture of abundant nature will surely strike a chord in our time: *‘Fish will be very plentiful, for wherever the water goes it brings health, and life teems wherever the river flows. Along the river, on either bank, will grow every kind of fruit tree with leaves that never wither and fruit that never fails; they will bear new fruit every month, because this water comes from the sanctuary. And their fruit will be good to eat and the leaves medicinal.’*

1 Cor 3:9-11, 16-17

Who are we really before God? No less than a temple of the Holy Spirit, built on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

John 2:13-22

The Temple action was radical—not an attack on abuse but on the functioning of the Temple as such.

Thursday 10 November

St Leo the Great, bishop of Rome, doctor

Philemon 1:7-20

A runaway slave sought refuge with Paul and, in the meantime, had become a believer. Paul entrusted him back to his original master, but no longer as a slave but as a brother in Christ.

Luke 17:20-25

In this Gospel, Jesus says the Kingdom of God is *among you*, a better translation than “within you.” It means the Kingdom is coming to be during the ministry of Jesus and even at the hands of Jesus, as he brings healing and forgiveness.

Friday 11 November

St Martin of Tours

2 John 1:4-9

The reading combines great warmth and encouragement with a severe warning against heresy, especially that heresy which denies the true humanity of our saviour. The core Johannine message is not lost, however: *this is the commandment which you have heard since the beginning, to live a life of love.*

Luke 17:26-37

Don’t be distracted by the last sentence, which is proverbial wisdom of unclear application. Instead, the core teaching is to look forwards, not backwards, in hope and confidence. As usual, discipleship comes at a cost.

Saturday 13 November

St Josaphat Bishop

3 John 1:5-8

Here we have a little window onto the world of early Christianity. Those bearing the Gospel depended on the hospitality and good will of the communities they came to visit. *Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.* (Romans 12:13)

Luke 18:1-8

The feisty widow is an appealing character and the parable does indeed illustrate the teaching on the need to pray continually and never to lose heart. The later reception of the parable may be noticed in the added verses.