

## Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 20:27-40)

Sadducees were the Toorak elite in Jesus' day. As wealthy landowners, merchants, priests, they cultivated lucrative contracts with their cruel Roman invaders to retain power over the Temple. But their lives were on a journey to nowhere; for them, there was no afterlife. At death, they were like a modern atheist in his coffin: all dressed up and nowhere to go.

The Sadducees, both good and bad, believed at death, they merged into a shadowy, unchangeable world called *Sheol*, from which we get the word *Hell*. In today's Gospel, they used an absurd example of a not quite musical "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" to ridicule and trap Jesus. Jesus played along. Since the Sadducees only accepted Scripture allegedly written by Moses, Jesus quoted Moses' meeting and theophany with God at the burning bush, where God said, "I am," (present tense) "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." He meant, these patriarchs are *still* living, (not in past tense/Sheol/shades). And, if God is the God of the still-living, then to God, *all people are alive*, living in a different transfigured, heavenly state. The proof of this is: God raised up dead Jesus on Easter Day. That is, God refused to let death have the final word, and still refuses.

When I was very young, as a horrible, troublesome red-head, a nun would produce a large picture of Hell to frighten me and other naughty ones into being good. It depicted hideous demons pitchforking hapless humans into the eternal flame. In time, I became an altar server. One Sunday, as two of us held burning candles, an unthinking priest lambasted Protestants who, he said, were writhing forever in the fiery pains of Hell. At this ignorant, insensitive utterance, the ten or eleven year-old moved a finger into the candle flame. His dad had recently died a Protestant. He wanted to *feel* what dad was now suffering! This goes on. Some time ago, I was taking the Sunday Eucharist, when in response to my question, "How are you?" the curate replied "My father died this week. *He is in Hell*. He never came to the Lord." I wondered how does he read Jesus' words at his capture in Gethsemane Grove, where he cried, "I did not lose a single one of those you gave me?" (John 18)

With my own father dead when I was eight, I would stay often with a kind, farmer-uncle, who, to make ends meet, dug country graves. One day, we found bones where there shouldn't be any, (a first time for me). From then on, I questioned the holy nun's image of hellish torment. My puny mind reasoned: to suffer the torment of Hell, you need a body, but this owner had left it behind. I knew Jesus' words to the Good Thief were "This (very) day, you'll be with me in Paradise." So, I concluded, we must leave behind our old self and rise as a disembodied spirit only to be given a new self *upstairs* to cover all the good we have sent ahead. In the meantime, Sister, you can't fry a spirit. So, at about eight, I convinced myself that we must all go to heaven.

How many will be there? Every Sunday, we recite the credal words: "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." I became

an Anglican, and, in the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, Article 3*, I found “Christ died for us and was buried and he went down to Hell.” That is, before he rose at Easter. Then *Article 4*: “Christ did truly rise again from death and took again his body, with flesh and bones ...and ascended into Heaven.” John 3.16 gives the comforting words, “God so loved the world that he gave his own Son so that *everyone* who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Everyone? Even Methuselah and Jezebel and Jeroboam?

What was Jesus doing in Hell between his death and resurrection? This is the Anglican belief called “*The Harrowing of Hell*.” It posits between the time of his death on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter morning, Jesus travelled to Sheol, to the abode of the dead, to all who had died since the beginning of the world. There, he released its captives from imprisonment, (including the now-believing Sadducees), taking them with him and “harrowing” over, closing over *Sheol/Hell* forever. The Gospel words today are “He is now God not of the dead but of the living, for to him *all of them are alive*.”

In recent years, I have found pleasure in the painting of British artist Stanley Spencer, (a survivor of the horrors of World War 1) especially his massive “*Resurrection in Cookham*.” There, he painted a cluster of figures awakening in their graves, pushing back the slabs in Cookham parish cemetery, London. They are waking to a new dawn, with a joyful morning feeling after the physical distress of dying. The people of Cookham parish are quietly emerging without struggle or hurry into a delightfully peaceful new world, *Cookham in Heaven*. They are already in a state of grace, received by Christ, who holds babies in his arms. Some women wear their pure-white baptismal layette as a dress, because baptism began their earthly life in Christ as Christian death brought the earthly part to an end. They wear their robe over which was said at baptism the words “bring this robe unstained into the everlasting life of Heaven,” words proven, as they wake once more in baptismal innocence, Paradise gained. A wife lovingly brushes earth off her husband; another buttons up her man’s coat. Little, ordinary, intimate happenings in this churchyard, now become a holy suburb of Heaven, for the artist, albeit a Great War horror survivor, could still maintain “There are no irredeemably wicked people.” Governor Bourke (of Bourke Street), raised a memorial tablet to his late wife in 1831: “Reader, he would be the most miserable of folk were he not comforted by the sure hope of meeting in a better world she whom he has lost in this.” Cardinal Newman adds, “and with the morn, those angel faces smile, which I have loved and lost awhile.”

We cannot control death’s call to “Come now!” but we can focus it a little more. Recently, I had the burial of the ashes of a stillborn. At the ending, mother let go nine white balloons, one for each of baby’s life on earth. But, no one was looking at the earth. All were gazing up into Heaven above, where baby was now alive to God and God to her. We may not fathom the reason why someone leaves us before time, yet “still through my tears I’ll see hope gently leading me, nearer my God to thee, nearer to Thee.”

Thus, too, we can pray with confidence the words of Psalm 23: “Though I *walk through* the valley of the shadow, I fear no ill, for you are there.” I know that, where there is shadow, there must be light to cause it, and Risen Jesus, the Light of the World, who has triumphed over death by rising, is nearby, to lend a hand and take our hand to lead us toward the breaking dawn in the lone east. We are an Easter people and our song is one of hope. Alleluia. Amen.

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10 November 2013