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32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, November 10, 2019 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: 2 Maccabees 7:1–2, 9–14
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 17:1, 5–6, 8, 15 | **Response:** Psalm 17:15b
Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 2:16–3
Gospel Acclamation: Revelation 1:5a, 6b
Gospel Reading: Luke 20:27–38
Preached at: the Catholic Church of St Pius X in Mofolo, Soweto **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

On the face of it – our readings today talk about a key aspect of our faith, the importance of life and our belief in the resurrection from the dead. In both the first reading and the Gospel we hear two stories about seven brothers.

In the first reading we hear the heroic story from the book of Maccabees about seven brothers who were prepared to die for their faith. And in the Gospel the Sadducees try to trap Jesus in a question about the afterlife with the tale of a woman who has had seven brothers as her husband.

If we look at the Gospel first, we will remember that in the Book of Deuteronomy 25:5–6 the law said that if a man died without children, his brother was to conceive a child with the widow and bring that child up as his brother's heir. This was so that the family name could continue. This is a belief and marital practice shared in several African cultures too.

The Sadducees and Pharisees fundamentally disagreed about the existence of the afterlife. The Pharisees believed in it, but the Sadduccees did not (some say that is why they are sad-you-see) because they could not find proof of the resurrection in the Torah – the first five books of the law in the Old Testament. But the Pharisees recognised the oral tradition beyond the Torah, which included the understanding of everlasting life. In fact, this belief was affirmed by the Prophet Daniel and became a standard part of Judaic belief from 160BC onwards. So in Jesus' time this was a very live issue and topic of conversation. But Jesus does not allow himself to be trapped by the Sadducees' question. He leaves no doubt about life beyond the grave, thus siding – perhaps for once – with the Pharisees

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– but he sees it as totally different from any earthly experience and does not require it to be linked to marriage. Instead he points to a different reason as to why there is life after death. He shows why there can be no marriage in the afterlife because raising new children will not be needed where there is no death.

Jesus instead points to a place in the Torah which mentions the afterlife, Exodus 3:6, where God said that he was the God of living ancestors long after they had died, this shows that they must still be alive with God in the afterlife.

Jesus thus points to a way that the Sadducces can believe in the afterlife. But if we think about it, the Sadducees' question was perhaps not so much of a trap, as it was their way of trying to understand life after death. Because, if we're honest, we all think about life after death and we do it with the language and images and context we understand. We ask ourselves questions like: 'What will our relationship be to loved ones and family?' So it is perhaps understandable that we might consider what our closest relationships would be like after death.

We cannot understand completely what life after death is like, but we know that it will be with God, … and that is about all we can say. Life is the only reality that we can understand, and we are told that it is a life promised to us, just like it was to our ancestors in faith, "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

But we can understand what life means to us in the here and now? We know that life is precious, which is why we try to defend life, from conception to the natural end, and why we try to honour all life. In fact, we do not even allow ourselves to take a life of someone who has done the same, because then we would be like them. We are against wars that create victims – those hurt by weapons, and those hurt by drugs – they all take away the life we hold precious. And now we are becoming increasingly conscious of the interconnectedness of all life – not just human, but plant, animal, and insect life… in all shapes and sizes, large and microbial – we must protect all forms of life.

Which is why it might be hard to understand the actions of the seven brothers in the first reading. If they valued life, they may have chosen to live – all it would have taken would be to eat some bacon – but evidently there is something more important than life here.

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The story in the Book of Maccabees is set in the time of persecution by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes, who ruled Palestine from his capital in Antioch in Syria from 175 to 164 BC. Antiochus Epiphanes ruled over a variety of Semitic nations and he wanted to make all of them conform to Greek values and convert their religions to worship the Greek God, Zeus. Since most of these peoples had polytheistic religions in which any one of their gods could be identified with another one like it in some other religion, this was not considered such a radical demand. But the Jews, alone among the nations, was monotheistic – that is they believed in only one God – and the God of the Bible's 1st commandment was that they should have no other gods but him. The king began to enforce his rules by making the Jews give up their practice of circumcision, forcing them to offer meat to idols, and to eat pork – all against the kosher laws of the Jews. As the persecution grew worse, the Jews rebelled under Judas Maccabeus and gradually defeated the Greeks to win some freedom for themselves. But many gave their lives before that day—among them the family of seven brothers in our first reading. One of the major takeaways from their story is that above all, the brothers and their mother all affirm a faith in the afterlife that will be theirs only if they remain faithful to God. They therefore do not value rewards in this world as worth anything compared with the hope for everlasting life.

We might not think eating pork is a big deal, and certainly, if our lives were at stake, how many of us might have just eaten the pork. But this was an important mark of the faith of the Jews with their neighbours. Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo explains that "At the time the Seleucid Empire were the imperial colonialists of their time, and they did what all colonisers try to do, to destroy the culture, worldview and understanding of their way of life of the colonised. I think this is the only time the book of Maccabees is included in the Lectionary, but if you read more of this book we see that the Jewish Priests co-operated with the colonial forces of empire, but it was the poor and faithful Jewish families outside of the priestly classes that resisted the empire, who kept the faith and honoured the covenant with God." As we hear St Paul remark in the 2nd reading, "the Lord is faithful, and he will give [us] strength and guard [us] from the evil one, and we, in the Lord, [will] have every confidence".

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What was important to them was keeping the faith and resisting the forces of those that would want to undo our culture. In our time there are plenty of altars we are asked to sacrifice ourselves on. Whether it is in the form of demands of race, of nationalism, of clericalism or patriarchy, or of wealth, power, prosperity, security, and competition, these are all forms of pork that are in direct violation with our covenant with God and our ancestors in the Christian faith. Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo notes that "We debase our God-given dignity by giving in to the demands of Empire. And we are therefore faced with the task of ejecting and rejecting that pork, of undoing all that which binds us to the ways and means of Empire and severs us from covenant with the divine, with creation, and with our fellow human beings."

Let us pray this morning that we might value life, but more than that, that we might value our relationship with God who is the giver of our life.

Let us think of the things we allow in our lives that compromise our relationship with God, and let us resolve to give them up – just as the Jews saw the importance of giving up pork, because it was a sign of keeping their covenant with God.

Let us pray for all those who do not enjoy a relationship with God. Let us live our lives in ways that attract people towards God – rather than push them away.

Amen.

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