

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 6/11/2016

Haggai 1:15b-2:9
Psalm 145:1-5,17-21
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-17
Luke 20:27-40

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

One of the most influential people in my life over the past 10 years has been Bishop John Bayton. I know that many of you here will know him or at least have heard of him. He epitomizes for me what it means to be a Bishop - one who is truly a shepherd of the people, and a confidante to many a priest in this Diocese, even though he has now moved to be closer to his family in Queensland.

Bishop John has many good and deep sayings, for which he is legendary. But perhaps Bishop John's most famous saying is this: "Is the Bible literally true?? Wrong question!!" Wrong question, he says...

Jesus today, it seems, is asked one of those "wrong questions" by the Sadducees. This is a group of religious people who think they have it all worked out. They are sure that their interpretation of the Jewish faith is the only and correct one - and they are sure that all of the passages of Torah that they rely on say unequivocally that there is no resurrection - that when a person dies that is it for them - no sense of being raised on the last day, or their soul living on.

And so, in an attempt to either gain some credence for their position, or to try and trick this new Messiah, they ask Jesus a riddle, designed to reinforce their narrow view.

And Jesus' response? He tells them that their narrow view is what is holding them back from any sort of understanding of who God truly is, and means that they have no true sense of the scope of God's power and of God's love.

They have completely missed (or maybe deliberately ignored) those parts of Scripture which reinforce God as the God of the living - the way in which God worked through the great men and women of the Hebrew faith - people such as Abraham and Sarah, Isaac & Rebekah, Jacob, Tamar, David. Surely it was their *life* that mattered, not their death, no matter what legacy they left behind. Or more correctly, it was God's life working through them that meant that their own lives were important in God's plan.

But the Sadducees asked the narrow question. They asked the wrong question. As Bishop John would say - "Is the Bible literally true?? Wrong question!! What you should ask is this: As you read the Bible literally, figuratively, allegorically, and spiritually, do you begin to see the breadth and depth and scope of God's love revealed in the myth of salvation history"

Is the Bible literally true? Wrong Question!

I think there is a real trap for us, and the sort of questions we ask in our faith. So often we ask questions in order only to get good answers. But as Rowan Williams once said "there are no easy answers, just difficult questions." And this is certainly the case when we ask questions about death, and the concept of resurrection. Those of you who were here on Tuesday evening for All Saints' will have heard Nathan give a most excellent sermon which wrestled with this very point - just how do we understand this concept of an afterlife?

Perhaps I should say here that I do believe in the resurrection - please don't get me wrong. But my theology of resurrection is not about a recapitulation of the way things are; resurrection is not simply a reset to the beginning. My understanding of resurrection expands my imagination of a God who creates something new: new heaven, new earth, new life, and not merely the same old, same old. That informs our perceptions of the next life even as it imbues our present life with hope.

But, in many respects, this is to miss the point - surely our questions should be far more about how we live - not how we die. Our reflections and our searching should centre around the ways that God calls us into relationship with him and with each other; how we are called to be the body of Christ; how we are called to reach out in love and mercy to those in our lives and in the world around us - to preach grace and love, to care for the broken-hearted and wounded in our community.

These are the things that the Sadducees seemed to miss, as their religious identity was formed around the central tenet of no resurrection. And this is what we, too, are at risk of missing, if we limit ourselves to a faith which is not critical, or questioning, but merely takes a set of doctrines and holds fast to them without an acknowledgement of context, or history, or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

And hidden within Jesus' answer to the Sadducees is far more than just a response to their question about the resurrection. Contained within the words of Jesus are a whole litany of promises that flow from the understanding of the God of the living whom we serve, and with whom we are called into relationship.

Because if our God is truly a God of the living, and not the dead, as Jesus proclaims today, then this has implications for those in this world whose lives are damaged and broken. Because a God of the living will have concern for such people.

So, concealed somewhat in the detail of this debate between Jesus and the Sadducees is a critical claim for the sake of, for example, women living in societies which do not recognise their worth as humans -- it seems that the Kingdom of God has something more in mind than the patriarchy that imprisons women now. No, women will not continue to be property. Women will not continue to be owned. Women will not continue to be passive in their place in society.

Jesus' answer suggests that God has a care and concern for children sold into slavery and exploited by nations who require them to work up to 18 hours a day for little to no money.

A God of the living would love those who are unloved in our community - including those exploited by people smugglers, and now held in indefinite detention, never (according to our government) to be allowed into this country - EVER.

The assumptions of the Sadducees when it comes to resurrection exposes their doubt and disbelief in its possibility, but they are even more impoverished than that. Their assumptions and beliefs betray also their inability to imagine that God might have something different in mind when it comes to eternal life -- and when it comes to what the Kingdom of God should look like amongst us.

Our God is the God of the living - calling us more deeply into love and life with him. Let us celebrate this relationship, as we become those who reach out in love to the other, knowing that our God cares for them - now, and for eternity...

In the name of God. Amen.