

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
ALL SAINTS / ALL SOULS SUNDAY
SUNDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2016
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Luke 20: 27-38

“Resurrection”

In the gospel reading for this Sunday we meet the Sadducees. They are people who don't believe in resurrection, and they challenge Jesus by asking him a trick question about life after death. They also happen to be the people who are in charge of the temple, the most influential and powerful part of the religious establishment of that time. Their view, that there is no life after death, is the traditional Jewish view, and in contrast with another view, probably influenced by Greek and Roman thinking, that there is a life after life in either a physical or a spiritual sense as the pharisees, another important group of the religious establishment in Jesus day believed.

Traditional Jewish thought, Old Testament thought, up until one or two centuries before Jesus lived, is surprisingly inconclusive about life after death and mostly envisages, IF there is somewhere to go, the afterlife as a pretty dreary, grey and soulless place, dark and devoid of life. In traditional Jewish thought there is no concept of heaven or hell as we know it. Apart from some fleeting, mostly negative, reference to a life after death, the Old Testament is not interested. What it is interested in is the living, their life here and now, and their relationship with God which works or not. If it works, God's people, the world, flourishes, if people turn away from God and the relationship comes under stress, God's people suffer, and the world with them.

In the New Testament that changes. But not a lot. Death proves to be unable to put a conclusive stop to Jesus' presence and influence in the world when he is murdered. Trying to put someone away into the deep dark vaults of death to put a stop to his teachings and stamp out the growing following of his way of life proves to be totally ineffective. Jesus lives on, and the more the authorities try to suppress the movement that follows in his footsteps, the more spirited this living becomes. Connecting traditional Jewish thought with Greek and Roman ideas that were prevalent at the time the thinking about what life after life might look like had already started to change before Jesus' day, and in the Early Christian movement, as it starts to distinguish itself from Judaism in conversation with other influential religious thinking at the time, Jesus' not being silenced by death becomes the main reason for the introduction of Greek and Roman thinking into the Christian Faith. This was mostly after the New Testament was written though. The New Testament itself is, like the Old Testament, remarkably inconclusive and sparse with references and ideas about life after life. Again: The here and now is far more important than any speculation about what the future might hold.

The text we read this morning is one of the very few where Jesus is portrayed as addressing the issue. God is not of the dead, but of the living, and for God the dead are alive.

That is what Jesus says. No more. There is no explanation or further speculation as to where the dead might be, what that place may look like, if people who've been married more than once will have trouble sorting their family situation out, etc. Those questions don't seem to be on Jesus' radar. All he says about it is that “the normal rules don't apply”, with no further discussion or in depth analysis and explanation of what that may or may not entail. For Jesus the only thing that is of importance is that even when people die they are not dead for God. That the living are only a fraction of the whole people of God who are alive, in this moment, to God and part of the extensive and complex network of relationships that rests within the everlasting embrace of God's love. They are still there. With the how, what, where and when not really that important, only the fact that we can trust in faith that they are, is.

I don't know about you, but I was brought up with a fairly concrete image of heaven and hell, with heaven a better version of the here and now where all troubles had been resolved and people were living in everlasting bliss and hell some godawful place where there was a lot of crying and gnashing of teeth. Where you ended up depended on how well you behaved.

As I grew older all sorts of questions started to surface around that image. Questions not unlike the ones the Sadducees ask of Jesus. I was asked by my non religious friends, I encountered other images and ideas about the hereafter in discussion with other Christians, I discovered the inconclusive evidence in the scriptures, and last but not least, my own mind started to wonder. Where would heaven be? How would everybody fit in? How would it be organised? Could it be very boring? Would the dead be able to see the living, influence their path, or not? Etc. etc. Once you start, and some of you may have experienced this yourselves, if you are the questioning type like I am, there is no end to the questions. I also encountered people for whom those questions didn't seem to matter. Who had their own version of whatever they thought it would look like and stuck to it. Often citing a trust in God that I sometimes found hard to muster. Until my first congregation hit me with over 300 funerals in 6 years. A couple of years where I was constantly in contact with grieving people, talking, thinking and considering with them the death of loved ones.

And there were a few things I learned then:

There are as many versions of what life after life looks like as there are people. Because we don't have any definite information, we tend to fill it in in a way that helps us think about our loved ones after they have gone. And there is nothing wrong with that, it reflects what Jesus says in today's text: all we know is that we don't know and can't reliably imagine.

What we do know is that God doesn't let go. Not even after we are dead. We are alive to God, and may know ourselves and our loved ones safe in his love.

Then there is this thing that people do live on. In the hearts and minds of those who loved them, in who they were and what they did, in what they leave behind, in the traces of what and who they were that continue to influence and be part of the world of the living. In the genes they hand on, in the thoughts they planted, even in the controversy and pain they may have caused people, live on. As long as we remember them and beyond.

I've been privileged enough to be with people at the time of their death, holding their hand, watching their breath, and seeing their faces smooth out after the echo of the last heartbeat has died down. Invariably, even in the most difficult of circumstances, that has been a deeply moving moment to witness. It's like birth. It changes the world, it changes reality in the profoundest of ways. One moment there is a living, breathing someone there and the next moment our relationship with that person has irrevocably and irretrievably changed. But somewhere there is an echo of them, or there seems to be. An echo some of us hang on to in one way and others in other ways.

And last but not least: If I, nine years after his death, suddenly feel my father's living, breathing presence closer than life, is that something that happens in my head, or is it another, parallel reality that leaks into mine? If I find myself talking to a friend who passed away and feel/hear, sense and answer coming from the other side, how much of that is them, and how much of that is me, filling in the gaps?

I don't know. Missing someone, missing their wisdom, their love, their presence can be such a painful thing, and apart from our selfish interest in keeping them close somewhere where we can still feel we can reach out to them, we want them to be safe, comfortable, loved and looked after.

I don't know that there is ever going to be a conclusive answer, other than "it's different" to that first thing, that longing to still being able to connect and feel connected when someone we loved has died. The story

of Jesus tells us that somehow there is more than “just” death. That life after death can work itself out in many ways, wonderful, positive and life and world changing ways, irrespective of where we imagine the person we have lost is exactly or what their after life experience looks like.

What we do know in faith, is that in God’s eternal presence lives are kept, and love is treasured. That in the complex network of history, of lives lived and genes redistributed, of thoughts developed and actions taken, of people being and living and relating and interacting, God’s love and compassion is at work, shaping, guiding, gently making the connections, filling in the gaps, healing the rifts and smoothing out the creases.

At least that is how I imagine it to be. God who has been bringing to birth, brings to birth, and continues to bring to birth this world, past, present and future, and the people in it, relating, connecting, building and shaping, weaving the fabric of life with all the different strands, colours and textures of life and living and somehow holding all of it in a loving embrace where everything and everyone finds their place, their fulfilment in a dynamic, forever changing whole that is finding its way to a future where all will come to rest in his compassion. But how that exactly works is a question that we can leave for now. In trust. Knowing ourselves and our loved ones somehow safely sheltered in his presence, we are called to live now, to leave positive traces in reality now, to write our own story into that fabric and do everything we can for those threads to be positive, colourful and generous ones. Called to bring everything that has gone into us, from those we have known and loved, to others whose influence and lives may affect ours in other ways, together and transform it into something wholesome and positive, a solid foundation where the rest of eternity can find a base to grow and flourish from into the future. Amen.