

Luke 20:27(28-33)34-38

**Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost|; Proper 27, Year C
Sunday, November 10, 2019; Church of the Ascension**

When I first arrived in Chicago from Canada some thirty years ago, I spent my first three years training as a hospital chaplain.

One aspect of Chaplaincy training involved taking my turn several times a month as the On-Call Chaplain. During those times I was the only chaplain in the hospital at night. Whenever a patient died in the hospital, I was called to visit and support families who lost loved ones.

There were times when I was called to support families following a death three or four times in an evening.

I always found these late-night visits extremely difficult. Their frequency over a single evening made them spiritually challenging. So much so, that when I returned to my bed following these visits, I often felt like I was getting into my own grave, so present was the reality of death upon my heart.

Prior to becoming a hospital chaplain, the reality of my own mortality was not really on my radar. I was a young man at the time, and I had my whole life before me. The hospital environment changed all that. Death was an ever-present reality in the hospital and reflecting on the prospect of my mortality was unavoidable.

Now that I am in my early seventies, it is an even more present reality. I believe it is an important spiritual practice to reflect on our mortality at any age, but especially so in the latter part of our lives. As Christian and religious people, these reflections will cause us to wonder about the reality and nature of the afterlife. What's next, if anything, beyond this mortal coil?

In this morning's Gospel we meet a woman who marries seven brothers, and who is unable to give any of them a child to carry on the family name. The Sadducees and the Pharisees who have their own internal quarrel going on about the reality of the resurrection, ask Jesus whose husband she would be in the afterlife. Their purpose was to trap Jesus in their quarrel and he, of course would have nothing to do with it, except to say that earthly marriage does not happen in heaven.

The one thing we definitely learn from this Gospel reading, is that heaven is qualitatively different from this world, but other than that, we are actually offered very little in the Scriptures, about heaven itself. We do of course have the totally imaginative and apocalyptic presentation in the Revelation of St. John the Divine.

As I listen to Jesus' response to the quarreling factions, I'm reminded of St. Paul's wisdom, when he informs us that "we see now as in a mirror dimly" when it comes to the afterlife. However, a time will come, he says, "when we shall know even as we are known." The Spirit fills us with hope of seeing Christ as he is, face to face.

If we are to take anything away with us from the Gospel reading, it is perhaps that we are invited not to concern ourselves primarily with the reality of heaven, except as a promise upon which we cast our deepest hope, and try as best we can to lay aside any anxiety around our own mortality.

The Christian Gospel has very little to say about heaven, but rather chooses to focus on our risen life in Christ as a reality in our lives in the here and now. As Christians, the focus of Christ's resurrection is not primarily the afterlife, although joining Christ in heaven is our hope, but on our living the fruits of Christ's resurrection in our own time and place.

For me, it is significant that we are reading and reflecting upon this Gospel immediately following our celebration of All Saints last week.

In our leaflet for All Saints Day, Fr. Sam Portaro reminded us that "we Christians dare to hope beyond the constraints of mortality. . . . a hope embodied in saints and souls, a vast company and communion dwelling beyond time and forever. It is an embarrassment, to be sure;" he says, "that we have no evidence to produce beyond our stories. . . . We are the gamblers who stake all that we have on unproven supposition. We alone dare to live as though there is a tomorrow, and more, a place within which and a people with whom to share that tomorrow."

You all need to know as Anglicans, that we have no specific doctrines that force us into a particular belief about the afterlife, beyond the Creeds where we corporately acknowledge that we all "look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come".

As Christians who follow Christ according to the Anglican Way, we are invited into this belief primarily through the experience of our Liturgies. Our celebration of All Saints invited us into a more experiential way of knowing.

These liturgies embody the Christian faith and its promises, and we are invited to enter into them supported through the life of the Spirit with a lively hope. The experiential nature of our worship, enlivened as they are by the life of the Spirit, present an opportunity for us to know and feel our way into a reality that cannot really be known through any other means.

But more than that, because the focus in our worship, once again is not primarily the vision of heaven, but the empowering of a call to service, as a way of living into the risen life of Christ, while being promised a deeper fulfilment of that life in eternity.

We celebrate the Saints as a means to support this call, and to remind us of that fulfilment. In our Liturgy, the afterlife is grounded in hope and Christ's promise. But we are also invited through a focus on service to let heaven take care of itself, as we more and more, day by day, embody the presence of our risen Lord, in the service of our neighbor.

We Anglican Christians are unique in the way we assent to this belief. We are not a confessional community, but a liturgical one, wherein we lay hold of the hope of the resurrection through prayer, contemplation, music, art, and esthetic. It is through our elevated and experiential participation in divine worship that we seek to approach the mystery of our union with God.

Let me share with you a slightly edited version of Sharon Schaefer comments on today's Gospel: "In our gathering together with one another in the Eucharist", she says, "we feel the shape of hope. We pass the peace, and that peace takes the shape of embrace and presence, the felt knowledge that we are not alone. We take bread, and drink the wine, these symbols that represent the polar opposites of life and death in bodied form, telling the truth we live. We together, one body, embody the shape of resurrection, as we move toward that culminating day on which our bodies will rise. (Pause) <http://www.eklesiaproject.org/blog/author/sschaefer/>.

So, in the end I am left with my feeling of getting into my own grave following an intimate conversation with death at the bedside of a patient and their families. And perhaps in the end it is not such a bad feeling after all.

We would do well to be reminded of the ancient monastic practice of keeping death before us as an ever-present reality, as a way to help us set spiritual priorities, rather than temporal ones. Let me leave you with some modern monastic wisdom on the subject from the Episcopal Society of St. John the Evangelist in Boston, from their monastic rule.

"We are called to remember our mortality day by day with unflinching realism, shaking of the sleep of denial. Paradoxically, only those who remember that they are but dust, and to dust they shall return, are capable of excepting the presence of eternal life in each passing moment and receiving ever fresh the good news of hope. The anticipation of death is essential if we are to live each day to the full as a precious gift". (ssje.com. Rule # 48 & 49)