

After life

7 11 10

Almighty Father,
whose will is to restore all things
in your beloved Son, the king of all:
govern the heart and minds of those in authority,
and bring the families of the nations,
divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin,
to be subject to his just and gentle rule.

My text may be found in the book of Job, chapter 19 and verse 25: 'For I know that my Redeemer liveth.'

What is the difference between St George's Venice and St Bartholomew's Dinard? Our church is always open during the day! But when someone wanders in from rue Faber for the first time, what do you think they might notice first? The cushions? There are certainly colourful and prominent enough to be seen. The prayerful silence? Certainly according to our Visitors' Book, the profound silence that permeates St Barts is a quality much appreciated. The painted organ pipes? We have actually had a request for a church postcard of them! But surely one of the most striking features must be our stained glass windows which surround us, depicting of key moments in our Christian story and presenting some of the heroes of our faith.

Perhaps our finest stained glass are the set of four windows above the altar which depict four key points in Holy Week: the Garden of Gethsemane; Jesus carrying his cross; the Crucifixion itself; the Resurrection. They point clearly to my text from Job that our Redeemer not only lived but lives still and that belief in the life to come is a central tenet of our faith as Christians, that we do not stop being our individual selves when we die but will rise again from the dead to a new life in Christ.

Our belief in life after death, like much else in our faith, comes from our Jewish roots. But a belief in an afterlife is a relatively late development in Jewish thought and there are few texts in the Old Testament to support the idea, our text from Job being one such. Instead of individual survival after death, a man would be thought to survive through his children. That it is why it is important in the Book of Ruth that Ruth should marry Boaz so that Elimelech and her late husband, Mahlon, will survive through the birth of their son, Obed.

It is this ancient obligation for a brother to marry his brother's widow if that marriage is childless which lies at the heart of the strange question in today's gospel from Luke in which the Sadducees ask Jesus a test question in order to expose the silliness of his teaching concerning an afterlife. They ask: 'If a woman marries and widows seven husbands, all brothers, none of whom is successful in begetting children, at the day of resurrection whose wife will she be?'

A clever question and the Sadducees think they have caught Jesus out. Basically, the Sadducees did not think that there was any such thing as a life after death and

their exercise in logic is simply a rational demonstration that the whole idea of our survival as individuals after we have died is nonsense. Oddly enough, on this point Jesus and the Pharisees agreed; life after death was a real fact for them. And Jesus dismisses the question simply by pointing out that the Sadducees' error lies in their total lack of understanding of the afterlife. It is not more of the same but something of a different quality where we are more like angels and there is no necessity for marriage.

Nowadays, Sadducees have disappeared as such but there are still atheists and humanists who doubt the possibility of a life after death, the survival of the individual soul. A belief that when we die we do not cease to be is one of the most attractive features of our faith. But what reasons do we have for such a belief?

The most persuasive is the example of the Resurrection of Jesus himself, a belief that what was true for him will be true for us. There is, too, the example of the saints who have lived and sometimes died a martyr's death, such as our own St Bartholomew, who died in the hope that they too will share in the promise eternal life. Then, thirdly, there is the assumption that each one of us is of real worth, of real value in the eyes of God our Father. If what the Psalmist writes in today's Psalm (17 v8) is true of us as well, that we are indeed 'the apple of God's eye' that he does 'protect us under the shadow of his wings' then I can't think that when we die that we will cease to be. Rather, I share Job's confidence that in spite of all that happened to him, he can affirm this simple truth:

'For I know that my Redeemer lives

and at the last he will stand upon the earth
and after my skin has been thus destroyed
then in my flesh I shall see God.'

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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H: Sermon 22: After life

