DEAD OR ALIVE?

Words of encouragement, comfort and hope preached by Dr John Thiel, Pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, cnr Charles and Florence Sts, Murray Bridge

Date: Sunday 7th November, 2004 (All Saint’s Day)

1. What has become of your relatives and friends who died in the Christian faith?

Today we remember with love and thanks all our loved ones, friends and relatives, who have died in the past twelve months. We especially remember Rosa Cutting, Neville Frahn, Rex Baker, Seth Rehn, Dora Sonntag, Joyce Pill, Dorothy Schilling and Norma Drewer, who had their funerals conducted by Holy Cross Lutheran Church.

Today seems to be an appropriate time to ask, “What has become of your relatives and friends who died in the Christian faith?” Have they been taken to heaven, or are they dead, never to rise again?

2. The Sadducees quote Moses

The Sadducees were a group with definite ideas on this question. We are told about these definite views in the first line of our text, “The Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection”.

The Sadducees have come to Jesus with a question about the resurrection. One way to try and win an argument is to quote an important and well-respected person. To get off to a good start, they quote Moses. Moses was the person whom God had called to lead his people out of slavery in Israel. Moses had overseen the ten plagues which led to God’s people leaving Egypt. Moses had led them through the Red Sea. Moses had overseen many miracles God performed in the wilderness. Moses had fought great battles. Moses had received the Ten Commandments. It was a very clever start by the Sadducees to quote Moses.

They begin, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.”

3. They extend the argument to the point of making heaven seem ridiculous

Apparently they too liked stories, perhaps even jokes, about heaven. It’s the same today.

They are quick to develop Moses' command and make its implications seem ridiculous: “Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

The idea of heaven, as painted by the Sadducees, is of a place with brothers fighting each other over who is to take the wife each one had in turn on earth. Just imagine how many such fights there could be. In-laws and children could get in on
the fights and chaos would ensue. Think of the sadness of those who cannot find their wife or husband at all?

The Sadducees chuckled to themselves. Surely they were on a winner here!? Just imagine those seven blokes in heaven all fighting over the one wife!? It would be more like hell than heaven!

4. Jesus shows their false assumptions

Jesus is quick to show their false assumptions. They had assumed that the resurrection life was simply more of this life. Perhaps that’s why some people aren’t so excited about the resurrection life. Perhaps they’ve had enough of the trials and tribulations of life. Perhaps they’re worn out and weary. They don’t want millions more years of the same!

The theologian Helmut Thielicke told the story of two monks who agreed that the first to go to heaven would return and say “the same” or “different”. In due course one monk died. The other monk eagerly awaited his return. When he came back, the message was not “the same” or “different”, but “totally different.” The resurrection life is not to be compared with anything of this life.

Jesus said the same to those Sadducees. He said, “The resurrection life is totally different. There is no marriage. There is no death. It is impossible to die.” The resurrection life is not endless years of the same but an unlimited amount of what is vastly better and totally different.

Once I invited a young woman to see a movie the title of which sounded weird and wonderful. “You must be joking”, she said, “but she came.” And she reckoned it was one of the best movies she had seen. I had had the privilege of introducing her to foreign movies, which she has come to like.

The resurrection life is like the person who was invited to something and thought it would be fairly boring. It turned out to be the night of his life and he wished he had done more to encourage his relatives and friends to come.

5. Jesus counters with his own argument about Moses

Now it’s Jesus’ turn to quote the great Moses. If you Sadducees can quote Moses, Jesus can too.

Jesus says, “The resurrection is spoken of right at the start of Moses’ ministry. Do you remember that story about the burning bush? (Every Jew knew this story like we know the Christmas story!) Way back then God is saying ‘Resurrection.’ God speaks to Moses from the burning bush and says, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ God is God not of the dead, but of the living. All these people are alive.”

You see, if you are driving past the home of Jeremiah Jones, and you say, “That’s the home of Jeremiah Jones”, the people listening to you will conclude Jeremiah Jones is alive. You don’t say, “That’s his home” when he’s dead. Even though my Father died only recently, we already speak of the place he used to live as Mum’s place. We don’t call it Dad and Mum’s place, because Dad has died.
When God says, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”, he is saying, “I am the God of these three living people. They are not dead – they have risen. They are alive.”

Although these three men were the fathers of the Israelite nation, they had their faults. When in Egypt Abraham told his wife to say she was his sister so that the Pharaoh took her for his wife and didn’t kill Abraham. He told the king of Gerar that Sarah was his sister. He had been so despondent about not having a child that he had had a child by his wife’s maid Hagar. Isaac told King Abimelech of Gerar that his wife Rebekah was his sister. Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright. These patriarchs were sinners!

Yet, through faith they entered eternal life. Moses said it.

The Old Testament doesn't have a lot to say about eternal life, but it does in the OT lesson for today: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that 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” (Job 19:25).

6. What has happened to our loved ones who have died in Christian faith?

What has happened to my loved ones who died in the Christian faith?

Jesus Christ gives us the answer today. There is a resurrection from the dead. It is totally different from this life. Your loved ones who died in faith are safe in eternal life. God is the God of our loved ones who have died in the Christian faith. Are your loved ones who died in the Christian faith dead or alive? Their lives are linked to Jesus Christ. He died on the cross for our sins and was laid in the tomb. But on the third day he rose again. He has risen. So, too, your loved ones will rise.

If we had the wisdom our loved ones now have we would want to do two things (1) To keep the faith that will bring us eternal life; and (2) to support others in their faith and tell others about this precious faith. Amen.