

1 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

Life Now or later?

Introduction to the readings

We are reaching the end of the long season of ordinary Sundays in which we have been considering the way we are invited to live as partners with God in building a kind and just world. We have been considering the stories about Jesus from this perspective and how they might help even today.

The two readings we hear this morning, one from Luke, and one from another letter thought to be written by Paul, about 51 years after Jesus to an early Christian community in Thessalonica - which was a major trade centre on the border of Greece and Turkey - both raise the issue of life after death!

This topic has continued to be a point of contention in the church between those who like the Jewish Sadducees in Luke's story, say in effect – "it's a rubbish idea, not possible and unnecessary in God's plan – there is no life after death" and those who want to claim it as a goal or reward for the righteous and understand it in physical terms!

Remember, the early church also expected Christ to come again and save the world from all that they saw that was going wrong with it. That is what phrases like 'the day of the Lord' were about – God's decisive transformative action in history – an idea that was long part of Hebrew expectation. The Thessalonians were so convinced that Christ's return was about to happen that many of them had stopped working and were just waiting.

Paul writes to correct this misunderstanding. His letter basically says "stop focussing on such things – those who tell you the second coming of Christ is at hand or happening now, are misleading you!"

And Jesus is being a bit smart in response to the argumentative test the Sadducee is trying to engage him in! They want to know who a woman will be married to if she has seven husbands and no children/sons, before she dies! Jesus has an answer from their own scriptures ... that they can't argue him with further!

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I had a bit of help this week in preparing my reflection for this morning. And I was very appreciative of the perspective of a young person for sharing his point of view.

I was asked what I was going to preach about and I mumbled a response and said something like  
"the readings are a bit difficult to make head or tail of this week... they've got something to do with life after death and Jesus coming again ... And there is a 'cut and thrust' argument between Jesus and some Torah scholars and I think Jesus was being a bit of a smart-alec!"

We got to talking and I explained about the '*lawless one*' the metaphorical term that was used to talk about the ungodly behaviour and attitude being experienced in those times. '*Rebellion*' is another of the ideas in the reading which pointed toward the ethics and attitudes they were living rather than the way Jesus was pointing to as 'God's way'. The young Christian community in Thessalonica was concerned that things had got so bad that the only way it could be to put it to rights again was for God to decisively intervene! So they were waiting for Christ's second coming which would start this change.

And I told him about the 'joke' that Luke records as that was the basis for the quick-fire riposte between Jesus and the Sadducees. It was a testing exchange over a childless woman and her seven husbands – a son/child would have secured continuity of the family after the death of the parents. Luke's stories about Jesus present Jesus as not adverse to insulting people, calling them hypocrites and illiterate – now he is at it again, this time giving these grown men a lesson on reproduction - that is what all this talk about marriage is about - when you are dead you do not need to marry and have children, so talk of husbands and wives is irrelevant.

At this point my sermon coach interrupted with a story of his own, from the Herald, about how Jeanette Fitzsimons has said she has changed her mind about worrying ecco light bulbs and saving energy over time, and emissions trading to offset emissions and what the CO2 emissions will do to the climate 35 years into the future. "That will be after she is dead he explains to me. Fitzsimons says "now, this life time is what we should be worrying about." Then after a pause he says, "That's what I think too. We should be leaving the coal and oil in the ground and change our lifestyle now. Unless we do that there will be no future for life on earth."

It seems to me that he had understood Jesus and Paul quite clearly. Life after we die, or the possibility of God's future intervention to put things right, are not things we can know about – we shouldn't even be wasting time and effort worrying about them – but we should be concerned about how we are living right now!

There is no need to be afraid however, even if things seem in such a mess. Jesus and Paul are both offering reassurance on this and encouragement for living well now.

Jesus trumps the Sadducees when he says "If by your life now in this world you are worthy of a place in heaven then you are already like angels, you are children of God. God is not the God of the dead but of the living"

And, in y words, Paul concludes by saying "we should be thankful for one another because, following the way of justice and kindness as we are called to do by Christ Jesus, focuses our attention on this world. The transformation that we seek will come with our efforts.

So, Paul encouraged his hearers in that little community in Thessalonica in the midst of the lawless of that place at the convergence of trade routes, to "stand firm and hold fast to the teachings of Jesus. By your efforts" he says "you will be filled with grace and find comfort and hope for all your good works."

The promise holds good for us too.

And we must keep trying to bring the change necessary in our own time that will ensure the good life of this earth and wellbeing of future generations.