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Judgment and Resurrection

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Judgment and Resurrection

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Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for November 10, 2013 for Cycle C:

2 Mc 7:1-2, 9-14; Ps 17; 2 Thes 2:16-3:5; Lk 20:27-38

JUDGMENT AND RESURRECTION

Lawrence E. Frizzell

"Thou dirge of the dying year," Shelley addressed the West Wind, and long ages earlier the Church chose this season to commemorate the faithful departed. Throughout November we are encouraged to pray for the dead, especially for friends, relatives and benefactors -- and also for those who died alone and unloved. Would that all those facing the mystery of death today be strengthened by the presence of family and friends!

Life is experienced most fully in community, ideally within a setting wherein people share ideals of the spiritual order. "Keep my statutes and my decrees, for the one who carries them out will find life through them" (Lv 18:5). Obedience to God's law normally brings peace and happiness, but this teaching of Israel's prophets and sages was tried severely during the persecution of the Seleucid King Antiochus IV (167-164 B.C.). At that time those in Judea who were most faithful to the commandments were penalized most harshly. Much earlier the psalmist defined life as communion with the living God, so people reasoned that even physical death could not sever this bond. The doctrine of immortality and resurrection of the body brought special consolation to the martyrs who refused to partake of the Greek sacrificial offerings.

The divine judgment of all human beings at death is the basis for the insight that resurrection differs for the righteous and the wicked. "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever; others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace" (Dn 12:2). The mother and her seven sons remained faithful to the Covenant, assured of a richer life together in God's presence. Moreover, their agony had a vicarious purpose, "imploring God to show mercy soon to our nation..." (2 Mc 7:37). They drew upon the teaching of the prophet about the suffering servant (Is 53:4-6) to give another level of meaning to their martyrdom. Not only was their fidelity the response to God's gift of life that would blossom into the resurrection; it was also the way in which Israel would become open to divine mercy (see 2 Mc 8:2-5).

At the time of Jesus the Pharisees proclaimed faith in the resurrection of the body but the Sadducees and the priestly leaders denied it because they found no evidence in the five Books of Moses (the Torah) to support the doctrine. On the contrary, the levirate law required the brother of a deceased man who was childless to marry the widow (Dt 25:5). To ridicule the idea of resurrection they posited an exaggerated case of seven brothers who married the same woman. Whose wife would the woman be in the risen state?

Jesus replied by declaring that in the coming age those rising to new life would not marry but be like angels. There was no use for Jesus to argue by quoting texts like Isaiah 26:19 or Daniel 12:2

as scriptural proof of this doctrine, because Sadducees gave primary emphasis to the Torah of Moses. So Jesus met them on their own ground, referring to the experience of Moses at the burning bush. God revealed himself by declaring: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" (Ex 3:6). If life were limited to this world, then the text should read "I was the God of your father...." The God of Israel had indeed revealed to Moses an aspect of the mystery of life eternal and, by implication, the resurrection. "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive" (Lk 20:38).

According to the version of this debate presented by Matthew and Mark, Jesus puts the Sadducee teachers in their place by declaring their ignorance. "You are misled because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Mt 22:29; Mk 12:24). They claim to have the key to interpretation of the Scriptures, so their failure to appreciate this doctrine is a serious flaw in leadership. Moreover, reflection on the infinite power of God is the basis for faith that the Creator can bring the plan of redemption to fulfillment.

The meaning of human life can be discerned properly only when we grapple with the mystery of death. The Church guides us in this search to know profoundly the message of the Scriptures concerning life and death. The resurrection of Jesus is the paradigm that shows us the power of God to transform creation in wondrous ways.