

Message for Remembrance Sunday – November 8, 2020

Luke 20:27-40

Even though it was written thousands of years ago, Homer's "The Odyssey" is still considered to be one of the great classics of world literature. The story begins with Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, and his decision to leave his family and join his fellow Greeks in rescuing the beautiful Helen of Troy. A ten year siege of Troy followed and the Greeks were finally victorious when they managed to enter the city using the famed Trojan Horse. The war was over but instead of returning home to his family, Odysseus travelled all over the Mediterranean world having one marvellous adventure after another, battling fearsome monsters, ferocious sea creatures and the like. He did this in order to gain fame, believing that if he became famous enough, his name would never be forgotten and so in a sense he would gain immortality.

Finally his adventures led him to the very end of the known world; to Hades, the dreaded place of the dead. The ancient Greeks believed that when a person died they went to Hades which was a gloomy place where people weren't quite dead but not quite alive either; it was a sort of twilight zone. While there Odysseus met all of the great heroes of the past. With horror he realized that they were just that, figures of the past and long forgotten; they most certainly were not living on through their great deeds. And if immortality was not to be found in what you did here on earth, then where was it to be found?

Upon leaving Hades Odysseus promptly headed back home to Ithaca and his family. He had come to the conclusion that immortality was not to be found as a soul living on in Hades. Nor was immortality to be found in having a great reputation either. Rather he concluded that immortality was to be found in living on through ones descendants.

Now this may sound rather odd to us but this is what many people in the ancient world, including God's people in the days of the Old Testament, firmly believed. Yes, a person died but they still gained a sliver of

immortality through their children, grandchildren and the following generations. In fact it is this belief that partially explains why the people in the days of the Old Testament thought that having children was so important; they were so-to-speak a ticket to immortality. Indeed this is why a religious law stated that a man had to marry his dead brother's wife and have children with her; this was done in order to ensure that his brother would live on.

When people started giving this some thought though, they quickly saw the weakness of the theory. How much for example did they really know about their ancestors? Generally not much. Could they really say that their ancestors were living on through them? Or how much would their own descendants really know about them? Once again the answer was probably not much. Slowly but surely the horrible truth dawned throughout the ancient world; that immortality cannot be achieved through those who will come after us.

The result of all this for many people was a numbing sense of despair. They concluded that their lives had no real purpose, value or meaning. What did it matter if a person was good or bad? So what if a person made sacrifices for others and always tried to do the right thing? In the end it made no difference. Others, far from giving in to despair, made personal pleasure their only goal in life. Since this life is all there is, live it to the fullest! Do whatever you want be it good or bad since there are no consequences unless you get caught! Not surprisingly perhaps, this attitude even found a place amongst God's people.

The Sadducees were the sophisticated and well-off group of people who ruled the Temple. While they certainly believed in God, they also firmly believed that this life was all there is and that there was no life yet to come. For this reason they were firm believers in what we could call the pleasure principal; eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die. They reasoned that how we live our lives here on earth has no consequences. Then however along came Jesus who dared proclaim that there is in fact a life yet to come. Now what was hailed as wonderful news by most people came as quite a shock to the Sadducees; why if Jesus was right then they

would have to change their ways! Some of the Sadducees then decided that they would take Jesus down a peg or two.

Suppose, they said, a woman was married to a man who died. She then married his brother but he too died. After that she married the next brother and on it went till she had married and outlived all seven brothers. Now the Sadducees wanted to know, if there really is a life yet to come then which of the brothers would she be married to? Would it be to husband number one or one of the others perhaps? Or maybe she would be married to all seven at the same time! The Sadducees were obviously trying to hold both Jesus and his belief about an eternal life up to ridicule but Jesus would have no part of it. He told them that they really didn't know what they were talking about. Yes, there most certainly is a life yet to come and in it we do keep our identities but even so, the life everlasting is not just a continuation of this existence. Rather the life yet to come is a whole new mode of existence. And it is this, our eternal existence that gives all of our lives here on earth value, purpose and meaning.

It was shortly before I left my first charge and there was a bit of a tempest in one of my congregations. There was a member there who had retired to the village and was a World War Two vet; indeed he had served with distinction. One day he came to me and said that he wanted his name added to the church's memorial plaque that commemorated all those associated with the congregation who had served in the armed forces during the Second World War. Well, to say that there was a debate when his wish became known would be an understatement. On one side were those who saw nothing wrong with the request; if this would make him happy then why not? Other people though, if you will pardon the pun, were up in arms about it; that plaque was a part of the congregation's history and it wasn't meant to be open-ended, adding more names to it decades later. As the debate went on, one of the elders asked me why this fellow wanted this to be done anyways.

To me the answer was obvious. His name was not recorded on a plaque or memorial anywhere and he was afraid that he and the sacrifices that he had made would be forgotten. He wanted, as if it were, a sliver of

immortality and an assurance that he and his life really did mean something. Turning to us, do our own lives really have any value, purpose and meaning? Do the sacrifices we make for the sake of our families and others in the world around us really mean anything?

The message and promise of today's lesson is that they do. Our lives really do have value, purpose and meaning. The longing of the man to have his name inscribed on a plaque is understandable but quite unnecessary. It is simply because neither he nor his sacrifices will ever be forgotten. Neither will those of all the others whom we honour during these days of remembrance. What they did will live on forever simply because both they and we will live on forever. As I read every year during the Act of Remembrance on Remembrance Sunday:

“Let us remember the continuing grace of God, whose love holds all souls in life and to whom none are dead, but all are alive forevermore.”

To God none are dead but all are alive forevermore; this is the gospel truth. Their deeds and ours too will live on forever. Sometimes people say that eternal life minimizes the importance of our existence here on earth; after all what are 70, 80, 90 or even 100 years compared to all eternity? In reality though, it is the exact opposite. It is eternity that makes our lives and those of everyone else here on earth so precious; it is eternity that gives them value, purpose and meaning.