

# ST MARY'S IFFLEY

## Can we have hope – what can we hope for?

7 November 2010

Two questions emerge from the readings that we've just heard that seem important to think about this morning – both the questions are about hope beyond death.

Can we have hope beyond death?

And what do we hope for?

First, can we have hope? No, said the Sadducees, forget it. There's no resurrection, there's no life after death, it's a ridiculous idea. And we heard the Sadducees, who were a particular group of people with some strong views, come to Jesus to argue that the resurrection is an absurd idea. Their example was simple! A man marries and dies – his brother marries the woman and dies – the next brother marries the woman and dies – you might have thought the next brother would have seen what was coming to him, but 'No', he too does his duty, marries her and then dies! This goes on until finally, after marrying seven brothers, the woman herself dies. And then comes the crunch question – in the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be, for seven men had married her?

Jesus' reply is in two parts.

First, that we can have hope. God is Abraham's friend, Isaac's friend, Jacob's friend and because of that all of them are in some sense alive – God remains faithful to his relationship with them. Our friendship with God cannot be destroyed by death. Yes, we can have hope.

What though do we hope for? Perhaps when you listened to the story the Sadducees told about the woman and her seven husbands you thought, “What a trivial story”, “What a crude picture of the resurrection”.

But before dismissing the story, think how we too work with very simple pictures of life after death – that we’ll be in some way re-united again – that they’ve gone to a better place. And Jesus takes these very ordinary human desires and says – there’s actually more! Life after death isn’t just about picking up from where we’ve left off – it’s bigger than that – yes, it includes our loves, but goes far beyond them. Life beyond death isn’t just about continuing this life, but totally transforming it.

How can we make sense of this?

Any attempt to describe it or picture it is going to be ridiculed by the Sadducees. But don’t worry, says Jesus, it is going to be alright – in fact it’s going to be more than alright. Think of the angels. Angels are nearer to God than we are – they behold the face of God day and night. The children of the resurrection, says Jesus, won’t marry, won’t be given in marriage, but will be more like angels – and if we are as near to God as the angels are, we will be far nearer to each other than we are now!

Can we have hope? Yes, says Jesus, God is faithful.

What do we hope for? Too little, says Jesus. Fix your hope on God and leave your loved ones with him – he can be trusted with them.

What though about the harsh realities of life – the pain, the grief, the loss? In the face of these, can we really have hope, a hope that makes a difference?

The Book of Job, which our first reading came from, takes these questions up with incredible toughness.

Job, the central person in the story, tells it how it is. Calamity overwhelms him – possessions are lost, wealth disappears, sons and daughters die and foul sores break out on Job's body so that he takes to scraping himself and sitting among the ashes.

Three friends come to join him there. They first of all sit with Job on the ground for seven days and seven nights without speaking a word because they see that his suffering is terrible.

Then Job lets out a long groan, in which he gives full vent to his feelings, ending by saying:

“I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;  
I have no rest; but trouble comes.”

Job's friends have a system to explain why trouble comes – it's because you are bad. So what they have got to do is persuade Job that this has all happened because he's done something wrong. So on top of disaster happening, Job now has three so-called friends trying to fit him into their system – if you are good, God will reward you, if you are bad, disaster comes.

Job, you must be bad.

There are three rounds in the debate – the argument between Job and his friends gets more and more heated. Then when the three friends finally give up, a fourth person appears, a younger man, angry with Job and angry that his three friends have failed so badly in the argument.

He too tries to persuade Job that he is wrong, using the same simple system.

But human experience and simple systems rarely fit! And when you try and impose a simple system on pain, grief and loss, it can only be done by denying parts of your

experience or by putting you in a system which then traps you. If your experience and whatever system is offered you, don't match, trust your experience and don't buy into the system however tempting it looks to you.

"What have I done to deserve this?" is the human cry.

"Nothing," insists Job, "absolutely nothing."

Where then does Job take his anger and pain?

Instead of trying to fit it into a system, he takes it to God. He's the only one who does talk to God, the others all talk to Job about God. But he takes it to God, how he's feeling, and he pours it all out, reaching deeper and deeper within himself to find some good place where he can stand before God rather than sitting on the ground, scraping himself, isolated and in grief.

Can we really have hope?

Yes, answers Job. And in our reading from the Book of Job this morning we heard his feet finding that good place where he could stand before God. And for just a second or two, standing in that good place, we heard Job cry:

"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,  
whom I shall see on my side,  
and my eyes shall behold,  
and not another."

No simple system, but a deep knowing coming out of his experience of wrestling with himself and with God.

Yes, we can have hope. Despite how it sometimes seems, God is faithful. This is what the Bible affirms from Job to Jesus.

What can we hope for? In his final prayer at the end of the book, Job says to the Lord:

“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,  
but now my eye sees you.”

What a hope! To see God, in whom all our wounds will be healed and our loves satisfied.