

During this month of Remembrance we mourn, we express our gratitude and we reflect on the lives of countless folk known to us and unknown, who have faced the struggles and perils of human life often on fear, often with fortitude, always with the certainty of death before them. They were our ancestors here on earth and are now our vanguard into eternity

But what of the afterlife?

Many of our traditional images of heaven and hell stem from the Apocalyptic literature and also from writings and paintings of the Middle Ages, for example Dante's *Inferno* and Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. We may have a dread of the torments hell, or purgatory if there is such a place. Popular imagination is of Purgatory as a kind of hell with a lower temperature. Of course most of our thinking about future existence is pure guesswork. The Cure of Ars, the mystic St John Vianney, when once asked about the life hereafter simply said, "I know nothing of to-morrow, except that the love of God will rise before the sun."

When confronted by a group of aristocratic Sadducees try to make light of belief in the resurrection of the dead, Jesus rejects their childish notion that the life of the raised is a prolongation of this life as we know it now.

But first let us put today's Gospel passage into its context.

At this stage in Luke's gospel Jesus is already in Jerusalem and he will not leave the city again. The whole of the 20th chapter deals with the coming climax of Jesus' public life and the situations which led to his rejection and condemnation by the religious leaders of his people.

Jesus' authority to speak and act as he does is challenged by the governing establishment, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. He gives them the warning parable about the vineyard owner who let out his vineyard to tenants. The tenants refused to give the owner the fruits of his own vineyard and actually killed servants who were sent to collect them. Finally, they also killed the owner's son, thinking that thus they would become permanent masters of the vineyard. But, Jesus says, the owner will destroy

those tenants and give the vineyard to others. They reacted in horror of course!

Then we have encounters between Jesus and two influential groups: the deeply religious and strongly nationalistic Pharisees try to entrap Jesus into making a politically compromising statement, and then the Sadducees, those upper-crust Jews immersed in political intrigue for their own benefit who refused to believe in the existence of angels – or resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees confront Jesus with the riddle of the woman with seven husbands to see how he would respond. After all it was the practice of widows marrying their husband's brother to carry on the family name, so, though exaggerated, the question was very real.

There is an inherent hope in the human heart for a life beyond this present “mortal coil”. We'd like to know that God have a plan for us, and that our lives have ultimate purpose or significance?”

We wonder whether, in heaven, after the resurrection, babies who died as babies will still be babies, and whether those who die at great age will be of great age, and if not, what age will they be, and for that matter, what age will we or anyone else be. (By the way, in the fourth century St. Augustine worked on this question and came up with an answer that satisfied him. He decided that everyone would be 33 -- which was generally thought to be Jesus' age at his resurrection.)

We also wonder whether we will recognize one another, and -- at least in some cases -- we wonder whether we will want to recognize one another -- or at least whether we want to be recognized by everyone. No doubt, there are also many who still ask about some variations and versions of "whose wife will she be?" or "whose husband will he be?" (Which could be connected with the issue of who we would want to recognize, or not recognize, and who we would want to recognize us. Did you ever wonder how many of those seven brothers the woman in the Gospel story really wanted to know forever?) Anyway, there are lots of other questions like this around, and we all have them.

Nobody can tell us reliable details about the afterlife. It is what Shakespeare called “The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.”

And yet we can look at it more hopefully through the eyes of the great apostle Paul who said: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of any person to imagine what God has in store for those who love him.”

This is an echo of what Jesus told the Sadducees. First of all, he told them that life after death is not exactly the same as physical existence.

Resurrection is not resuscitation. Secondly, Jesus raises a point which pervades the whole of the Gospel message. All those who are in Christ enter a new relationship with God and with all other people, which transcend relationships of blood and marriage. Jesus is the Lord of life. And that life is not terminated by physical death.

“The glory of God is a person fully alive” (Gloria Deo homo vivens) said St Irenaeus and only that person who has the perfect freedom to let go of everything, even physical life, for the sake of truth, justice and love and total commitment to the well-being of brother and sister is a fully alive person.

Today’s reading from Thessalonians reminds us that God chooses us to be holy and to inherit the glory of his Son Jesus Christ, as he did those early Christians. Therefore as people of faith, we can stand firm on the Gospel because God’s promises to us in Jesus Christ are certain, and we can take comfort because God’s plans for us are good. God’s purpose is to make us like the Risen Christ, to make us like Jesus by means of our own resurrection to eternal life. Jesus grounded this hope, not in the problems of the present, but in the living God himself.

Holding faith in the mystery and power of the resurrection is a challenge to all of us. We, like the early Christians, are tested and tried by both internal and external powers. The powers of death and evil are ever present. When we find our faith wanting, we have scripture to refocus us on the reality of the resurrection; both Christ's and our own. Unlike the first followers of Jesus, we have a deposit of faith through both the Old and New Testaments to strengthen and inspire us. We have the story of Job to help us explore the depth of faith in the midst of suffering.

Job was a righteous man who was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil, despite the many trials and tribulations he suffered, including being taunted by his friends to forsake his faith in God. Job responded with perhaps the most well-known affirmation of faith in the resurrection: "For I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has thus been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God."

For us, our hope comes from knowing Jesus, and only from knowing Jesus. Our hope comes from our trust in the power and the love of God. There is no other source of real hope. Not only do we not know any of the details of the life to come, we are not ever going to know any of the details; at least not on this side of the journey.

So, we are called to hope, to real, dynamic, living hope, based solely on our trust in God. We are given no specifics, no answers, no solutions, no picture postcards. Instead, at this place of all places, we are called simply to surrender our questions and our difficulties and our logical puzzles and to trust that God will handle things better than we could even imagine; and that God's love and care for us will surpass all that we can ask or imagine.

We are to remember, when we die, and when those we love die, that God does not die. God's love for us, a love that has already carried us through so much, a love that has already been so gracious to us -- that love does not die. That love will continue and that love will grow, and that love is what we have to rely on. One of the things this means is that the best way to prepare spiritually for our death and for the life to come is not by taking hard lessons or by trying to figure out the details of the afterlife. The best way to prepare ourselves spiritually for our own death and the life to come is to work on trusting God more, and to practice letting go.