

'LIFE IS CHANGED, NOT ENDED': 32nd SUNDAY C

If you happened to be at Flemington for the Spring Racing Carnival this past week, you would have seen on display a stunning crop of beautiful roses. It's hard to realize that in just a few days time they'll all begin to wither and die. This is the lot of all living beings on the earth. Eventually they all wither and die. This includes human beings, even though we generally last much longer than the flowers.

When I was young I felt so alive, so strong, and so energetic, that I could not imagine myself as dying or dead. It was hard to think that way of any of my immediate family either. But in 1975 my father died, in 1991 my mother, in 2001 my sister Marie, and in 2006 my sister Eileen and my brother Pat both died. Now with all those experiences behind me, it's a lot clearer now than it was then, that I too am destined to die.

What about you, Brothers and Sisters? Can you imagine yourself dying or dead? I wonder what your thoughts and feelings are about this. What questions do you have about the end of your life on earth? Does the prospect of your death fill you with fear and dread, or have you accepted that it's something normal and natural? Will your relationship with God then be different from what it is now? Do you expect to meet your loved ones again after you've gone from this world? Do you see yourself as passing away into nothingness or as passing over into the arms of God, the God of life and love?

All our questions and concerns about this are connected with the incident in today's gospel. At the time of Jesus one of the powerful groups often confronting Jesus was the Sadducees. They were religious fundamentalists. They accepted no development in religious insight and teachings beyond the first five books of the bible. Because the Pentateuch (the first five books) had nothing to say about life after death, they strongly denied it. They knew, however, that Jesus did believe in life after death. So they decided to bail him up about this, in order to ridicule and humiliate him. They put to him a silly scenario. There was this woman, they said, who married seven times to seven brothers. In the next life, whose wife will she be?

Even though they are trying to set Jesus up, he answers them politely and courteously. He insists that there is a real life for good human beings after this one. We survive death. We are not annihilated. We don't pass into nothingness. But in many ways the life to come is quite different from our experience of life now. Thus, in heaven, where we hope to be with God for ever, there is no getting married and no sexual union. Basically, when good people die, they pass over into the arms of God. They see God face to face, and they see their loved ones in God. They enjoy the company of God for ever. In the presence of God there will be no more sadness, no more crying, no more grieving, no more worrying, no more anxiety. In their union with God they will be totally, perfectly, and permanently happy.

A story may help our understanding. A little girl was waiting in an airport lounge to board a plane. She was so excited she kept bouncing up and down. 'Little one, where are you going?' her mother asked. 'To Granny! To Granny! To Granny!', the child kept saying over and over again. Her answer helps to illustrate the point Jesus was making about the afterlife. We

should think of it not so much as going to a place as being with a person, i.e. with our great, wonderful, interesting, fascinating, merciful God, who is Life and Love Itself.

Every now and then I look at the Death and In Memoriam notices in “The Sun” or “The Age”. I’m intrigued at the sheer number of people, religious ones and non-religious ones, who show that they believe strongly in life after death. They’ve got that much correct. But some of the things they say about it suggest that they imagine that life after death is simply a continuation of life as they experience it now. Thus they talk about looking down from the sky, about having a beer with their mates, about Sunday lunch with Mama and her pasta. Rugby union players, perhaps with tongue in cheek, claim that their game is the one that is played in heaven.

The facts of faith, though, are that good people survive death, and after being purified, they go to God in heaven. But the life with God is not identical with the life they live now. The famous Preface for Christian Death sums up the matter beautifully when it prays: ‘For your faithful people, Lord, life is changed, not ended.’ But even though it is a new life we hope and expect to live, that life has already begun. It has begun now in our relationship with God. How important it is, then, to live in harmony with God here and now, to live in a loving way, to live in friendship with God! For, as a very wise saying has it: ‘As we live, so we die. And as we die, so we stay!’

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