

“Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Bless the bed that I lie on. There are four corners to my bed; four angels are around my head. One to watch and one to pray, and two to bear my soul away. Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

Perhaps this prayer is familiar to you, at least the last verse anyway. This delightful old English prayer was known better than the Lord’s Prayer and recited often among families of 18th C. England. For me this was a formative prayer, said with my parents and then again with my own children before bed every night. Of course it was expanded to include all the people we wanted God to bless and I can remember as a child, sometimes drifting off to sleep before we could say AMEN. This prayer planted the seeds of my first notions about resurrection and life after physical death. The belief that God gifts us with a new life grounded my faith.

The hope that is within us as a Christian community is born of this belief that in Christ we are alive beyond death and as children of God we are heirs of an everlasting kingdom. Our Christian tradition so weaves beliefs about resurrection into the fabric of our being that I sometimes find myself surprised and saddened when I encounter a tradition that does not include a belief in eternal life. The Sadducees in our gospel story today are one such group, and reading this narrative allows us to think more deeply about our own resurrection beliefs. Whether this subject is uncomfortable or just speculative we don’t take many opportunities to raise the intriguing questions this encounter invites. What will resurrection life look like? Are we alive with God even though our bodies are not resurrected until

the last day? Where do we envision those who have gone before us? While we may not find direct answers to some of these mysteries of our faith, perhaps our reflections may open our imagination to the possibilities of living in this life more fully as children of the resurrection.

Our passage today is set at the temple in Jerusalem where Jesus has been teaching of the kingdom of heaven. This story happens just before Jesus' passion and highlights the radical discontinuity between Jesus' teachings and the concerns of the Jewish leaders. There were strong divisions within the Jewish community. The Sadducees were members of the high priestly families, wealthy and politically connected. They accepted the Torah as authoritative scripture and believed in free will rather than God's providence. Rejecting beliefs of angels or resurrection, the Sadducees understood eternal life as producing heirs that would continue the family legacy and land ownership. Mosaic Law stated that if a woman's husband died without producing sons, his brother was to marry her and continue the family name. OT principle held that people would live on through their children.

The Pharisees on the other hand accepted the teachings of the Torah and the prophets. They believed in resurrection as the soul leaving the body after death for either punishment or reward. Influenced by Greek philosophy that claimed the body would die but the soul was immortal, shades of this notion continue today. The concepts of resurrection echo in OT scriptures such as what we heard in Job, "For 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.”

Ezekiel tells of the dry bones rising to life picturing a Jewish nation resurrected.

In this divided community Jesus’ teachings threatened religious leaders and their hierarchy. Already Jesus had been confronted about his authority to preach and teach the word of God and now the Sadducees posed this question about resurrection. Whom will this woman who has married seven brothers be married to in heaven? This was not a teaching moment but a situation of entrapment. If Jesus answered their question he would either deny Mosaic Law or refute resurrection beliefs. Instead Jesus answered in a way that pointed to a vision of the future beyond their conception. He spoke of a world that does not include marriage or procreation because like angels, the children of God in that age do not die.

Using the scriptures the Sadducees so revered, Jesus quoted the story of the burning bush where God is identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who are alive to God though dead many years. Jesus sought to break open their limited perspectives bound by the rules of this earthly world, teaching that life in God cannot be understood simply as an extension of this life. Resurrection is raising the dead and transformation into new life. Jesus embodied an eternal perspective that empowered a life lived beyond the boundaries of earthly understanding. Limited vision of those around him led to persecution and ultimately to the cross.

As we think about resurrection today we may struggle with similar limited perspectives. Our Christian belief in the resurrection is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the NT teachings that those who believe in Christ will be raised like Christ at the end of time. The New Testament speaks also of immortality in the now, that eternal life is a matter of relationship with the God. Resurrection can be seen as a “now” and “not yet” phenomenon that will only be understood fully on the last day. So we face fears of our mortality every day, and often live as if this is our only life. We try to create our heaven on earth with possessions, success and power and forget about God’s eternal perspective. We forget about loving our neighbors, showing mercy and seeking social justice. Our anxiety about death leads us to protecting the kingdoms we have built around us.

But if we do believe that our life is eternal with God, how could this change the way we live our life while on earth? Do we see the care of God’s creation as a priority? Do we see our brothers and sisters as eternal? Could we be so emptied of our own affections in this life to live a life for God’s purposes? Last week we celebrated the lives of the saints before us, many of whom saw this greater perspective and gave of their earthly lives for their faith. Today is also a day of remembrance, of those who in their courage to see a larger view gave their lives for the freedom and justice of others. It was Dwight Eisenhower’s vision that Veterans Day would remember those who served their country and promoted an

enduring peace. This Veteran's Day we recognize those men and women who in the now and in the past have served for eternal peace among humanity.

To live as if we will be raised to eternal life is to be freed to face our Calvary moments with assurance that we are children of the resurrection. To embrace the gifts God has given, knowing that everything comes from God and will return to God, empowers us to share in our abundance and be faithful stewards. Allowing the eternal to be central in our lives helps us to love beyond the boundaries of this world and to seek a peace that passes all understanding.

We began with an old English nighttime prayer and I would like to conclude with this prayer written by Mother Teresa whose life lived out a resurrection attitude. May today there be peace within. May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith. May you use those gifts that you have received to pass on the love that has been given to you. May you be confident knowing that you are a child of God. Let this presence settle in your bones and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love. It is there for each and every one of us. Amen.