

2019 32ND SUNDAY

The Jews of Our Lord's time were as divided in their beliefs as modern-day Christians are. The biggest divisions of all was between the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Pharisees believed that there was life after death; the Sadducees did not.

The Pharisees controlled the synagogues. Almost all rabbis came from their numbers. When ordinary Jews gathered on the Sabbath at their synagogues to listen to the Scriptures, to pray, to sing hymns and to listen to the preaching of the rabbis, it was the message of the Pharisees that they were receiving. Consequently most of the people in Israel believed- as Jesus did- in life after death.

The Sadducees were of the priestly line and controlled all worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. Most were landed gentry and because of their wealth dominated the Sanhedrin; the governing body of Judaism. Thus they had immense power. They were extraordinarily conservative. As far as they were concerned if something was not mentioned specifically in the first five Books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy- Books they believed to have been written by Moses- then it was not to be believed in. And because life after death and the resurrection of the body was not mentioned in those first five key Books, they gave it no belief.

It was obvious to the Sadducees that Jesus shared the belief of the Pharisees in life after death. In today's Gospel they came to mock Him, armed with a fantastic and hypothetical situation, which they believed would make Jesus a laughing stock if He answered as they expected Him to.

Jesus refused to dignify the Sadducees' far-fetched story with a direct response. Instead He made it clear that they had failed to grasp the 'otherness' of the afterlife. In heaven people will neither marry nor be given in marriage.

And very simply Jesus showed the Sadducees how life after death is at least implied in the Book of Exodus. The fact that Moses calls God the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob seems to acknowledge that the patriarchs, now long dead, were still very much alive in God's presence.

How did Judaism come to be so divided on such a basic religious question?

Around 200BC, Israel's powerful neighbour, Greece, was blessed with philosophers, the like of whom would never be met again in the history of mankind: Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Pythagorus, Epicurus to name just five. Through logic and assuredly through God's inspiration, the great philosophers of ancient Greece had come to a belief in the continuity of life beyond death.

It didn't take long for a significant number of religious thinkers in Israel to appreciate that while the Greek belief in life after death had no mention in the

Hebrew Scriptures, it was very much in harmony with them and added a wonderful new dimension to them.

Gradually many people in Israel came to accept belief in life after death; giving birth to the Pharisee party.

The Book of Maccabees was written in 165BC. Central to the Book of Maccabees was a belief in life after death. It was therefore anathema to the Sadducees. They refused to consider the possibility that it should enter their Hebrew Scriptures. It was, however, revered as inspired by the Pharisees and all Greek-speaking Jews and included in their version of the Bible- the Septuagint.

The defiant speeches of the brothers are a magnificent testimony, not just to their courage, but to their belief that after death they would be raised up by God to a glorious new way of life.

Listen to the words of the brothers once again: The first brother: “Inhuman fiend, you may discharge us from this life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever.” The second brother: “Heaven gave me these limbs. Cut them off if you will. From God I will receive them back.” The third brother: ‘I am about to meet death at your hands, yet relying on God’s promise I know that I shall be raised up by Him again.’

The faith of the brothers was indomitable. Their hope was radiant.

How sad it is to attend funerals where God is never mentioned. Funny stories are shared, pictures of fun times are displayed and acts of kindness are remembered. But, you know, if there is no belief in life after death- so what? The life of the dead person is like a stream of water flowing into the desert and disappearing without trace.

George Orwell put it very forcefully: ‘Either life on earth is a preparation for something greater and more lasting, or it is meaningless, dark and dreadful.’

Belief in an afterlife gives us hope- that most precious of all spiritual commodities. It is a light giving meaning to our work, our struggles and sacrifices.

As Jesus told the Sadducees- God is a God of the living not of the dead. God made us for eternal life.

Christ, Himself, became the argument in this great debate. He underwent a cruel, seemingly meaningless death. But God refused to allow Jesus’ death on the Cross to obliterate His life into nothingness. Rather Jesus experienced the glory of resurrection from death- the harbinger of our own resurrections from the dead.

The Risen Jesus is the ultimate argument against the Sadducees and all those who like the Sadducees believe that at death we slip into nothingness.