HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 32 YEAR C

6 NOVEMBER 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

Having fights and arguments with other people is a regrettable, but probably fairly common experience of human life and as well as between enemies, strangers and chance acquaintances, they can also happen, sadly, among friends and family: where there is a bond of love its opposite does seem prone to make an appearance. These can perhaps be more painful.

I knew and worked a little with a young man who joined our monastery in the hope and expectation that he was entering a new and different world, in which everyone would be nice to him and he would experience as a consequence a new happiness. He did not, you will be relieved to know, experience the physical torments and taunting imposed by their persecutors on the Maccabean martyrs as narrated in our first reading. Nonetheless there were difficulties involved in living with very different characters albeit with one ideal in common, there were furthermore unexpected and grating personality clashes and the shock of discovering others and oneself not yet quite perfect; his ensuing disappointment and disillusion proved sadly greater than my help and he left.

Fights, arguments and persecutions crop up in all our readings today and we are left with a distinct impression that we are being told that they are to be a continuing experience, from without as well as from within, for the people of God. While not with the savagery of the first reading, Paul refers in the second reading from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians to the no doubt tiresome, debilitating and hindering ‘interference of bigoted and evil people’, while Jesus’ discussion with the Sadducees in today’s Gospel from Luke becomes, even if toned down from the versions in St Matthew and St Mark, a quite testy dispute about the resurrection of the dead.

These three disputes appear clear cut, with villains and heroes: Greek persecutors against Jewish rebels, opponents of Paul in Thessalonika and traditional religious leaders opposing the view held by Jesus, and in fact also the Pharisees, concerning resurrection. The appearance of clarity, though, may be a trick of perspective and it may be that as for us the disputes are often enough a case of night battle, in which enemies are not always clearly seen and maybe often enough the disputes seem to lie as much within ourselves. We can react most badly to things in others which are in fact repressed somehow within ourselves, things we cannot or do not want to see.

We are promised one day a clear vision, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians to ‘know even as we are known’, as our responsorial psalm has it ‘I shall be filled, when I awake, with the sight of your glory, O Lord’. It is a promise of a beatific vision. But for now, as Paul has it, we see only ‘puzzling reflections in a mirror’.

The Gospel reading, and in particular Luke’s version of the discussion with the Sadducees, represents a developing attempt to understand a human destiny beyond death, which in this case seems to combine ideas about a physical resurrection, which developed quite late in Old Testament Judaism with notions of immortality of the soul in Hellenic thought. If found worthy of a place in the other world, we are to be children of the resurrection, but also spiritual like the angels. That is not going to involve physical reproduction as now, and not the sort of nourishment upon which we now depend and no longer mortality: they do not marry ‘because they can no longer die’. But until we know angels better than we do at the moment it does not yet help us to be clearer that we are going to be like them. We see only puzzling reflections in a mirror. This seems to call for a humility of mind, to which of course we are not much inclined when embroiled in an argument. This may therefore be a good reason to find a distance from our argumentative selves.

To some extent, to be sure, references, such as in today’s readings, about the nature of resurrection are intended to give information and to answer puzzles, to settle arguments. Sometimes when he disputes with the religious authorities and experts of his time Jesus seems to give answers which evade being caught on the horns of an intended dilemma – so for example on paying taxes to Caesar and on whether John the Baptist’s baptism came from God. They do not answer the question directly or they shift the ground.

That seems not to be the case here with the answer to the Sadducees; yes there is a resurrection from the dead and the risen are like angels. St Paul will be equally clear in opposing the Sadducees according to Luke in the Book of Acts and he too will reach for a picture of the risen body, a flowering seed, in 1 Corinthians 15. But still the reliance here is on reaching for an image, more than on the giving of information or the answering just of curiosity, the settling of an argument. It is a straining beyond what can be said, seen or understood here and now. So even where we may seem to have argument honed clarity, in fact we have as much allusion, a reaching for something which cannot be fully expressed.

Today’s readings aim less to satisfy curiosity than to encourage hope and perseverance through the difficult and trying eventualities of life, whatever they may be. This is the case in a very particular and acute way for believers facing the appalling cruelties of say the Maccabean period.

The responsorial psalm is less specific, but there is a sense of looking in adversity, pictured as a night time of the human heart, for the divine light coming at dawn, heralding the vision of God, which is salvation and life: ‘I shall be filled when I awake with the sight of your glory’, a vision for which we were made and for which we long.

The second reading, St Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, sees him, as battling those difficult and trying people, whose presence it is a conclusion of history and experience, will always be troubling us and it leads Paul in a short passage to use words seven times relating to hope, endurance, comfort, strength, preservation and endurance.

To return to the psalmist’s image we dwell yet in the dark, barely making out what will come to us with the dawn. ‘Guard me as the apple of your eye. Hide me in the shadow of your wings. As for me in my justice I shall see your face’. Seeing the Lord’s face, the vision of God’s glory, that which fills the lives and is the delight of the angels. We use today the 4th Eucharistic Prayer, which in its preface notes that the angels gaze upon the glory of the Lord’s face and it invites us to join with them; it reminds us of our plight: through disobedience we lost God’s friendship and we find ourselves mired in a world of battle, but now he enables us to seek and find him. We do seek. We will find.