

The Third Sunday Before Advent (Remembrance Sunday) 2019.

Just over three weeks ago, my wife and I set off for a week's holiday in Vienna. At first, when we boarded the plane at Heathrow, everything seemed to be going fine. However, to cut a long story short, our plane turned out to be faulty and we were sent back to the terminal whilst another plane was found, which eventually got us to our destination four hours after we were meant to have arrived. The whole experience was ghastly, to say the least! You know what it's like: you flip through the inflight magazines over and over again whilst the plane sits on the tarmac. And you are thinking, "*No, I can never afford that Cartier watch or that incredible hotel in the Bahamas! Good heavens, is that really the price of a gin and tonic on British Airways...?Please can we just take off?*"

I mention this today – Remembrance Sunday – because when I reflect on how *trying* such moments in life can be, they really are as nothing compared to what some people in the world suffer and what men and women have endured in war. It reminds me of how important it is to give thanks for the courage and sacrifices that so many have shown in defending our country.

But I believe that, in addition to this, Remembrance Sunday throws into relief serious questions of *faith*, and how it can relate to huge suffering, such as we see in war.

At first glance, it might therefore seem that our three readings this morning are a curious choice for Remembrance Sunday. But, on closer examination, I think that they can be helpful in wrestling with these questions.

The whole of the Book of Job, from which our first reading today is taken, tries to deal with the problem of suffering in the life of a just man of faith. St Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians is addressed to a church being undermined by people misleading it into thinking that the second coming has already taken place, as well as being oppressed in other ways. Then in our Gospel, we heard how the hard-line Sadducees pose a trick question to Jesus in order to try and undermine his growing,

popular support, which was beginning to be deeply threaten them, not least because he was delivering his radical teaching right under their noses - in the temple in Jerusalem: the very heart of their rigidly held traditions and faith.

But all three of our readings this morning also point us to the way in which faith can be tested and indeed, the way human beings persist in trying to *test* God, which is ultimately a waste of time. The Book of Job concludes with the realisation that no matter how much Job seems to blame God for his terrible suffering it ultimately remains a mystery. The Thessalonians are in a state of considerable anxiety, but – although not crystal clear – it would appear that this has been caused by some of the community, trying to – as it were - test God, or at least their faith, by putting it about that Christ has come again – already. And then, as I have said the Sadducees try to corner Jesus and try to prove his teaching to be wrong. But, of course, they don't succeed.

You see, I believe that faith is rather like cricket. I see the batsman as being like the Christian and the bowler as the opponent of faith, longing – as it were - to get him or her out – to defeat him or her. A weak analogy, of course: most bowlers I know are nice people. But then again, just as cricket looks so much easier from the boundary, from the side-lines, so Christianity can look very much more straightforward from the edge, rather than in the middle, where one is trying to build an innings, rather as a Christian is trying to build the Kingdom. And of course, at every cricket ground there is “codger's corner” where the comment is usually *“It wasn't like this in my day”*. Most of us in the church have heard that one!

And so, we have Job, who sounds as if he is right out of his depth at the wicket. There he is, really struggling. His friends are eloquent defenders of the view that God must be punishing Job for some past action. They cannot grasp that his suffering is a mystery. and that God is rather bigger than that.

But then – and this is the pivotal moment ... Job takes a leap of faith. What does he say? *“I know that my redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the*

earth". Job has a vision of God's future. God is a living God and he then says: "***in my flesh I will see God***".

You see, these readings are all leading us to see that God has a future for us in death as in life. Job has a vision of that, the Thessalonians need to be put back on track about it as "***the day of the Lord***" hasn't come yet. And the climax to this progression is in Our Lord's response to the Sadducees that one day the children of God will be – as he says – "***like angels who cannot die anymore***". Those who are in Christ, the children of God will continue in a life with God after death. As Jesus says: "***He is a God of the living, not of the dead***". All life here, and hereafter consists in friendship with God whatever life throws at us and whatever suffering some have to endure.

When Basil Hume, who later became Cardinal Hume was Headmaster of Ampleforth he used to say: "***Most schools prepare their pupils for life. Here we prepare them for their death***". That might sound strange, but of course, it resonates perfectly with the Christian teaching that this life is part of something much greater.

But back to that "googly" that the Sadducees toss at Jesus.

As we are told - the Sadducees "***say there is no resurrection***". So, the question about whose wife will the woman be in the resurrection is not to seek information but to try and trick Jesus. They only believed in the authority of the first five books of the Bible and so were wedded to Deuteronomy 25.5, which states that a man is obliged to marry his brother's widow if her husband dies, in order to provide a legal heir for a man who had died childless.

But Jesus simply states that in the life of the world to come, which has no place for death, marriage as a means of continuing the human species becomes irrelevant.

So, I believe that, as members of the Church today, we need to live as people who are anticipating the life of the world to come and should not be afraid of death.

We had a wonderful affirmation of that last Monday night, when we celebrated the Eucharist enfolded in the choir's sublime singing of movements from the Requiem by Gabriel Fauré. One of two people told me afterwards that they real had a glimpse of heaven and the life of the world to come. It was a privilege to be present. We are so, so fortunate to be able to worship here and I pray that I, for one, will always remember that and that it will help me to keep so many other things in life in perspective – even a delayed flight.

Cathedrals do transcendence well, but the challenge to all of us it to also see the transcendent in other ways and in other places in life: sometimes in places which are very “unchurchy” indeed. And, of course, we sometimes also see the transcendence and unquenchable love of God in suffering. He has been there too, in Christ.

The challenge to us is to live as children of God *in the here and now, in all the circumstances of life* and it doesn't need me to tell you that the Gospel is packed with examples of how that is done.