

The mystery of life after death

6 November 2022

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

Mystery ... how does a little seed grow into a big tree?

How do tiny ants work together so well?

If we cut ourselves, how do our bodies heal?

When we grow old and die, where do we go? Bible tells us that death is not the end ... but that we go to be with God forever ... we call that place heaven, but we don't really know what it's like because no-one has been there, except for Jesus. So it's a bit of a mystery.

We trust what Jesus says about heaven because of all the other good things Jesus said and did and how he loved people.

BIBLE READINGS

[Luke 20:27-39](#)

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. 'Teacher,' they said, 'Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?'

Jesus replied, 'The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.'

Some of the teachers of the law responded, 'Well said, teacher!'

[Revelation 21:1-4](#)

Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the new

Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

MESSAGE The mystery of life after death

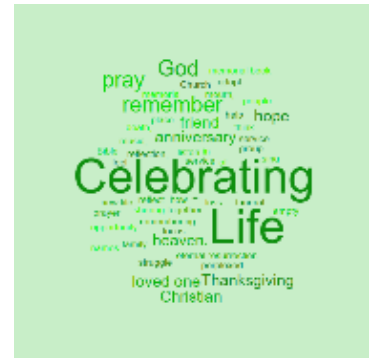
Death has been present with us a fair bit recently ... with the deaths of Shirley Maddern and Margaret Newman and this week the death of John Lewis. In the past fortnight we've also interred the ashes of Joyce Page and Mavis Ambrose in the Memorial Garden. And I've had a close up and personal encounter with death in my family with the passing of my own father just recently.



So in this context of death, I want to bring a message of hope as we explore the mystery of life after death, a topic that we do our best to ignore most of the time. But when someone close to us dies – we come face to face with some big questions ... such as ...

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- *What happens to a person when they die? If you've ever had the privilege and heartache of sitting with a dying person, you know that there's a change when they die – the person's breath or soul or spirit is no longer present – just a dead body.*
 - *What then becomes of the person's soul or spirit? Are they immediately whisked away to heaven, wherever that is, or do they somehow linger nearby? Or is death the end of that person?*
 - *Will we be reunited with loved ones when we die?*
 - *And what is heaven like? ... is it a shadowy existence? Or do we become like angels with a spiritual body? What age will we be? Will we recognise other people? What will we be doing in heaven?*
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Related to these questions about death are other questions about **resurrection** and **hope** and **eternal life** and some of the **myths** and **mysteries** that we hold onto dearly. And are these myths really just the stuff of **fantasy** – pie in the sky when you die, by and by – or do they help us to press on through our grief?



These are all big questions and I certainly won't be able to address each of them to everybody's satisfaction today. What I will try to do, though, is to gently point us in the direction of what the Scriptures speak about and let each of us work out for ourselves where we sit on these matters of life and death.

To our Gospel reading first, where Jesus is teaching in the temple courts in Jerusalem in the week leading up to his arrest and death. Various Jewish groups and leaders are looking for ways to trap Jesus so as to hand him over to the Roman Governor Pilate.



In today's reading, it is the **Sadducees** who try to trap Jesus ... they were a priestly group descended from the line of Zadok, were closely allied with King Herod and who benefitted financially from the operations of the temple. They were effectively **secularists** –

separating social and political life from religion – as they did not believe in God's ongoing activity in the world or in any form of life after death (thus they were 'sad, you see'). For them, this earthly life is all there is. Their template for life was the first five books of the Bible – the *Torah* or Jewish Law.

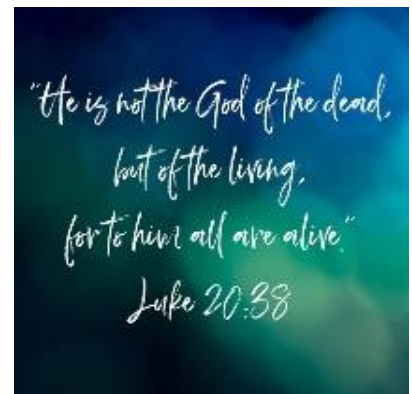
Their question to Jesus is designed to make the concept of resurrection look ridiculous – and thus to mock Jesus and his teaching. Their hypothetical question is based on the requirements of marriage law as set out in Deuteronomy chapter 25 and as described in the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis chapter 38. The relevant law goes like this ...

If a man marries a woman but dies childless, then she must marry one of the man's brothers and have children with him so as to perpetuate the dead brother's name and legacy.

So, the Sadducees ask, if some poor woman ends up being married to seven brothers – who then all die – whose wife will she be at the resurrection since she was married to all seven? Obviously not a lot of sympathy here for the plight of the poor woman, tossed from brother to brother like a beach ball!

Jesus' response is in two parts:

- First, the life of the age to come – resurrection life or eternal life – is completely different to our current life. Marriage and its associated social function of procreation will not be needed to perpetuate the family name. People will no longer die or grow old. The reading from Revelation goes further and suggests that there will no longer be mourning or crying or pain. Instead, Jesus suggests, our existence will be more like that of angels, glorious spiritual beings who dwell in God's presence.
- Second, there must be some sort of life after death as God speaks to Moses as being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – implying that God is still in relationship with these three patriarchs although they are long since dead. So, Jesus insists, God is the God of the living and from God's perspective, these three patriarchs are all still very much alive ... which implies that there is some sort of life after death.



So rather than making Jesus look silly, Jesus turns the tables on the Sadducees and makes their more limited understanding look silly.

But I want to spend the rest of the time this morning looking at some of the questions we raised earlier, starting with death.

Talking about **death** is one of the taboo subjects in our culture. Perhaps that's because we **fear** death or at least fear the **process of dying**, which can sometimes be quite upsetting, though is more often quite peaceful.

The inescapable fact is that all living creatures die.

We will **all** die one day. It's a natural part of life.

Knowing that we will die and that we therefore have a **limited** time given to us, can help us set priorities and help us direct our energies accordingly.



- What blessings are we grateful for?
- How do we more fully live in the current moment?
- How might we improve and build on the relationship we have with ourselves, with others and with God?

Life can be very tough, of course, for people who have **lost loved ones**.

The pain of loss often feels like a part of our heart has been ripped out.

Every person's experience of grief and path through grief is different. It's messy rather than a simple progression ...

Often grief is **circular** – we can be doing okay and then some activity or association with our loved one brings back memories – both of joy and of loss.



But Paul writes that we Christians do not grieve as others do who **have no hope** ... and that if we hope in Christ **only for this earthly life** then we are to be more pitied than other people.

For Paul – and for Luke – and for each of the NT writers – the **resurrection** of Jesus changed everything.

Without the resurrection, Jesus was a **famous teacher** or **inspiring prophet** but not more than that.

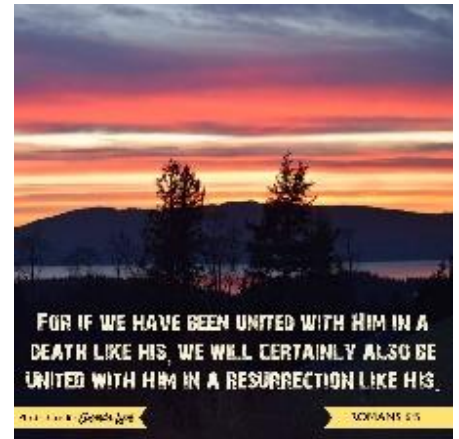


For Jesus to rightly be considered the Messiah and Son of God, then his prediction of rising from the dead and the reality of his resurrection were central. Paul writes to the Corinthian church that the risen Jesus appeared to Peter and then the Twelve, then to more than 500 brothers and sisters – most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote – and then to James and finally to Paul himself. Jesus was seen and touched by most of these people – although



he was not quite the same as before as he could apparently appear behind locked doors and equally disappear, as the two from Emmaus testified. But Jesus was recognisable as Jesus, risen from the grave.

For the NT writers, the fact of Jesus' resurrection established a **pattern** and a **precedent** for all other believers, so that what was true for Jesus is also true for other Christians. Hence there is the promise that although we die physically, we will be raised by God with a **spiritual body** – and – like Jesus – enjoy an ongoing relationship with God. Paul calls this a great **mystery**.



But what will resurrection life in heaven look like? Here we are on thinner ground.

Apart from Jesus, we assume that no-one has been to heaven and returned to tell us what it's like – although there are accounts of people (such as Ian McCormack) who've had near death experiences and recount of being drawn to the light, and heaven being a wonderful place that is beyond what we can imagine.



I can't tell you precisely what to expect in heaven, except that we will all know God in a much more intimate way that we do currently and that it will be a place of joy and peace – that is often envisioned as a wedding feast – so perhaps with fine food and wine and music and song – and being with those we love – and getting to meet Jesus and God face to face. And an existence that doesn't end, free from pain and crying and death.

Which all sounds pretty good to me.

In summary

- we will all die one day, so the incentive is to appreciate the life and the time we've been given
- further there is no need to fear death – for our life will continue – though in a different form.
- Life in heaven will be beyond our wildest imagination
- and at the centre of everything will be God's loving and welcoming presence.

Alternatively, we could take the view of the Sadducees in today's reading – and many

secular people today

- that there is no life after death and that this life is all there is.
- Once again, the incentive is to appreciate the life we've been given – but without the hope and promise of resurrection or life in heaven.

What we choose to believe about life after death and how that impacts how we live here and now is up to us.

Jesus has given us clear pointers through his teaching and example.

How we respond is a matter of faith – as these issues remain a deep mystery.