



ACTA
LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year C
Year of Luke

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READINGS

A reading from the second book of Maccabees 7:1:2. 9-14

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 16:1. 5-6. 8. 15. R/. v.15

A reading from the second letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians

2:16-3:5

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 20:27-38

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The Bible, both the Jewish part and the Christian part, was born in a world of violence. While the Book of Genesis is not

the first book of the Hebrew Bible to be written, it begins in mythical time with a beautiful imaginary account of the creation of the world. Its seven day simplicity embraces a depth of theology that speaks to the human heart and mind to this very day. The account of the creation of Man and Woman is profound. Both Man and Woman are created in the image and likeness of God. Together they share responsibility “over all the earth” (Genesis 1:26). Both man and woman are given responsibility for the increase of themselves. The narrative ends with the creation of the Sabbath, an invitation to pause, to meditate, to pray, and, above all, to rest.

The story of the creation of Man and Woman in the second account (Genesis 2:4-25) is more earthy, more fanciful, but not without profound observation. There is still an imposed responsibility for creation, pictured as a fanciful garden with convenient rivers on every side—a wondrous blessing if your imagined garden is to be a paradise in the Middle East—and a plentiful supply of food. Ominously, the man is banned from eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Unfortunately there is a speaking serpent, a con artist, and the man and woman find themselves in the real world of struggle and pain, and of murder. But Cain’s killing of Abel is but a prelude:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.
Genesis 6:11-12¹

There is an old spiritual song that comes from the wisdom of slaves and the treasury of their descendants in the deep south of the United States:

¹ The Hebrew word used in Genesis 6:11 for violence is *hamas*.

God gave Noah the rainbow sign:

No more water!

The fire next time!

The tower of Babel, a monument to human hubris, stands in the pages of our Bible as a warning to all humanity that striving “to build a name of ourselves” (Genesis 11:4) always means destroying other people.

Even when God begins the human story again and calls Abraham, the project cannot be accomplished without slavery, rebellion, the killing of the first-born of Egypt and the destruction of the Pharaoh’s army in the Sea of Reeds. The Book of Joshua is a textbook for colonialism with a God-given mandate (such invaders of other people’s lands usually blaze the name of their god on their bloody banners).

The story of the people of Israel is a story of repression. Again and again the warring empires of the Middle East and Europe (the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, Napoleon and the British) each did a share of the killing—and it has yet to stop.

A sad chapter of the never-ending violence gets a mention in today’s first reading, the only extract in our Sunday Lectionary from the Books of the Maccabees. It is a brief picture of one episode in another hopeless attempt of little people to taste freedom and to live in peace. While the Jewish people gave the word *shalom* to the vocabulary of humanity, it has had little experience of that word in the reality of their lives. No one can listen to the first reading today and not beg God for forgiveness for what Europe, in its imperial delusions, created, from the time of Alexander the Great, to the religious imperialism of Middle-Eastern Arabs, to the cross-bearing Crusaders, to modern-day Northern European economic exploitation.

Go on line and read the story of the Maccabee family and ask why we insist on repeating the sins of the past. Better still, read it in your Bibles.²

A reading from the second book of Maccabees 7:1:2. 9-14

It happened ... that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers".

When [the last brother} was at his last breath, he said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for our laws".

After him, the third [brother] was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands and said nobly, "I got these from heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again".

As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

When he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth [brother] in the same way. And when he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life".

The word of the LORD.

² The Books of the Maccabees are not to be found in the Hebrew Bible of the Jews, nor in the Bibles produced by Christians in the Reformation traditions. They are to be found in Catholic and Orthodox editions of the Bible.

Many commentators read the story of the Maccabee family and are delighted to find statements by the seven brothers and their mother concerning the resurrection of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked. This gives some assurance that Christian beliefs concerning “the Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell” have their origins in their origins in Jewish faith. In today’s reading one of the seven brothers defies the wretched imperialistic Greek King Antiochus (see 2 Maccabees 7:24) with scornful words:

*You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life,
but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting
renewal of life, because we have died for our laws”.*

It is true that the Second Book of the Maccabees bears witness to a developing theology of expectation that life does not end in death. But one should not isolate such belief from the horrors that these faithful people suffered. We must avoid a tendency to rejoice that there is a future beyond this vale of tears (a rather unfortunate phrase). We may be in danger of forgetting that we must pray that God “takes away the sins of the world”. We must realise that we are called, not to shuffle off this mortal coil, but, in the words of Pope Francis, to “dirty our hands” in working to save humanity from all that is evil.

However, as we near the end of the Church’s year, readings direct us to think about creation’s destiny. St Paul seemed to think that he and those who embraced Christian faith were living in the last days and that indeed, in the old phrase, the end was nigh. In this he was mistaken. Nonetheless, it is well to keep a look out, for it is true that we know not the day nor the hour. As the poet said, readiness is all.

A PRAYER OF DAVID

*R/. I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.*

*Hear a just cause, O Lord;
attend to my cry!*

*Give ear to my prayer
from lips free of deceit! R/.*

*My steps have held fast to your paths;
my feet have not slipped.*

*I call upon you,
for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me; hear my words. R/.*

*Keep me as the apple of your eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings.*

*As for me,
I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake,
I shall be satisfied with your likeness.*

*R/. I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.*

In the Hebrew Bible many psalms have a heading. These headings usually announce that what follows is a *mizmor*, a psalm. But some are headed a *tefilah*, a prayer. There is no obvious difference between the two. But one headed *tefilah*, a prayer, is more personal, more obviously coming from a heart scalded by doubt or pain.

Psalm 18 seems to be a humble demand to be heard. The voice of a good conscience pleads attention: *attend to my cry!*

turn you ear to me! As an eagle does its young, hide me in the shadow of your wings! The little phrase when I awake suggests that the one saying this earnest prayer is emerging or hoping to emerge from a dark night of the soul:

*When I awake,
I shall behold your face ...
I shall be satisfied.*

What will banish the dark night is waking up to God's face, filling emptiness with the glory of God's presence.

A reading from the second letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians 2:16-3:5

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

The word of the LORD.

The writer of this second letter to Thessalonian Christians imitates Paul's ending of the first and ends with a prayer. The prayer begins with our Lord Jesus Christ, whereas Paul would usually begin such as prayer with mention of God the Father

first. This he does in I Thessalonians (5:23). There is no great significance in the reversal of order and Paul is not consistent in the matter. After all he opens his very angry letter to Galatians with,

Paul, an apostle— not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead ...

Galatians 1:1

The ending of II Corinthians mentions the Lord Jesus first:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

II Corinthians 13:14

What is important is to note how closely Paul links the Father and Jesus Christ. It was this kind of association of Father and Son (and Holy Spirit) that eventually came to fullness in the Church's understanding of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God's love and the giving of eternal comfort, come as gifts. That is, these offerings are gracious, are given unearned; they do not come in answer to our merits. They are given by the Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father without any prior claim that we may make on them. Furthermore, they are freely offered for our *eternal* comfort. They are not short-term, not occasional; they are never-to-be-taken-back gifts. To quote St Paul in I Thessalonians,

... God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.

1Thessalonians 5:9-10

The writer appeals for prayers that the word of God may continue to spread and that more and more people be delivered from evil people. The gracious giving of love and eternal comfort will ensure strength to do all that is commanded of them.

Thus those graced by Father and Son will be guarded from “the evil one”. To this end, the writer prays for those who read and hear his letter. The prayer is a pointer, indicating to where their faith must look for assurance:

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

The prayer reminds hearers and listeners constantly to remind themselves that God’s love is steadfast love; it endures forever. They are to be certain that they can rely on the steadfastness, the perseverance, and the total commitment of Jesus to their present and eternal welfare.

**A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke
20:27-38**

MARK 12:18-27	LUKE 20:27-38
<p>And Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. There were</p>	<p><i>There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his</i></p>

seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife.”

Jesus said to them, “Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.

The word of the LORD.

brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.”

And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him”.

The word of the LORD.

Luke copied his account of the encounter of Jesus and Sadducees from the Gospel according to St Mark. St Luke, a non-Jew, as far as we can tell, depended for his information concerning Jesus on those who instructed him in the faith and on those first Christians who received, treasured, and passed on all they knew about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Scholars are pretty certain that he was acquainted with a copy of St Mark's Gospel, not only for the broad outline of the Jesus story, but for precise details recounted by Mark. Yet he adapted what he read in Mark to suit his own style and purpose. Read the two accounts and underline what changes Luke made to the Markan version. Readers of the Gospels need to be aware that, though the same stories are to be found in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, they are usually given a slant that fits the design and purpose of each Gospel. So we cannot always be sure of the exact details or context of the story in the life of Jesus. Our Gospels were edited to suit the concerns of those for whom they were written.

Characters — Real and Imagined

Jesus was not a priest. This meeting with Sadducees is the first and last time he meets Sadducees, a leadership class among the elite in Jerusalem. While throughout his Gospel Luke has made this readers and hearers aware that Jesus frequently referred to the Hebrew Bible and that he showed an intimate acquaintance with its contents, up to this point he had not met Sadducees. Nor had he debated with people who were steeped in priestly concerns. In fact, the incident related in today's

Gospel is the first and only time Jesus crosses swords with Sadducees in the whole Gospel.³

This first and only meeting with the Sadducees is marked by very pronounced sarcasm. The very stupidity of their story illustrates contempt for the layman coming up from the country. The man from Galilee, and from Nazareth, an unheard-of village, was not worthy of serious debate on profound religious matters. A stupid story will be enough to expose him to ridicule. Their haughty “Moses wrote *for us*” is insulting, as if to say, “What would you know about such matters?” The delicious irony is that Jesus, the true Teacher, will send them away silenced by his deeper understanding of God’s holy words.

Sadducees

Sadducees take their name from Zadok the priest (II Samuel 8:17). In his imaginary rebuilding of a new Temple in Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel sends in the priests:

This chamber that faces south is for the priests who have charge of the temple, and the chamber that faces north is for the priests who have charge of the altar. These are the sons of Zadok, who alone among the sons of Levi may come near to the Lord to minister to him.

Ezekiel 40:45-46

After the return from exile in Babylon (around 437 B.C.), when rebuilding the institutions of the past, Zadok’s descendants became the authorised family from which the High Priests were chosen. At the time of Jesus this priestly elite and their aristocratic supporters had their own understanding of Jewish faith. They were conservative, as opposed to the more liberal

³ Luke’s second work, *The Acts*, mentions the Sadducees at Acts 4:2; 5:17; and at 23:6-8 four times.

Pharisees. They had little time for the Prophets, insisting that the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, presented the truest account of Jewish faith and these five foundational books were to be interpreted strictly. Unlike the Pharisees (see Acts 22:6-9), Sadducees gave no truck to fanciful beliefs such as resurrection from the dead. Though the Sadducees are not mentioned by name in the Passion story, the priestly elite to which they belonged was responsible, with Pilate, for the death of Jesus.

Levirate wives

There are seven brothers and one bride in this preposterous story. While the number seven is often used as a propitious number, here it is simply a peg on which to hang the silly story. However, the basis of the story is firmly rooted in the Hebrew Bible. The Book of Deuteronomy, a definitive foundational document of Jewish faith, states quite clearly:

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

Deuteronomy 25:5-6

Read the story of Judah, Onan, and Tamar in Genesis 38:1-30. The neglected woman Tamar is forced into prostitution in order to win her right to a husband. The Levirate law that underlies the story was a social, economic, and religious piece of legislation. It laid down that the brother of a man who dies without a son was obliged to marry the widowed wife. The first son that the woman bore was then regarded as the child of

her previous husband. This arrangement effectively kept property in the original family, ensured the name of the dead man did not perish from the land, took care of a widow woman left on her own, and give a cohesiveness to the broader family that ensured the wellbeing of children. To read a profound religious mediation on what will appear to us as a peculiar arrangement, there is no better place to start than the Book of Ruth. In its brazen love-making (she gets into bed with him) the story of Naomi and Ruth upholds the right of women to justice, economical wellbeing, and respect. From Ruth came King David and from King David came Jesus, son of Mary. Check out Matthew 1:5, the genealogy of Jesus.

The Story

The story told by the Sadducees is deliberately insulting. It is intended to mock the theological illiteracy of the man from the Galilean hills. The reply of Jesus is not without theological incisiveness. First, Jesus issues a correction: *The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage*. Of course, it was women who were given in marriage and Jesus will not have them left out of consideration. “Sons” must be understood as including young men and young women.

Then those who live a full life and reach the end of their days come to resurrection of the dead. But they do not then marry; nor are they given in marriage. No longer can death claim them; they are as angels, sons and daughters of God, sons and daughters of resurrection that makes them forever family of God. As family of God, they will not be married out of that family. They are, as it were, newly begotten into an eternal love that cannot be broken or dissolved. For the Sadducees marriage arrangements are for this world. For them life ends in death and their preposterous story proves their point. But what they have done to is leave God out of the equation and

abandon humanity to She'ol. In effect, they are denying that God's love is an everlasting love. According to Sadducees, God's love ends when human life ends.

For Jesus, the sting of death is healed. To be like the angels is to be partakers of the glory of God, as the receiver of glory and the giver of glory. The multitude of the heavenly host who gathered around the manger were praising God; their song will be sung by all who walk to God through the portals of death:

Glory to God in the highest!

The Proof

This is where the discussion becomes essentially Jewish. It concerns the implications of grammar. Jesus goes to the very Scriptures honoured and revered by these Sadducees:

When the LORD saw that [Moses] turned aside to see [the burning bush], God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And he said, "I Am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 3:4-6

A few lines later the Moses is commanded to teach what he has learned to "the people of Israel". It must become the foundational doctrine of faith:

God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and

thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me'."

Exodus 3:15-16

To spot the clinching argument of Jesus, pay attention: the LORD **IS** the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But these men are dead. You can say the LORD **WAS** the God of Abraham, his son, and grandson. Surely, not **IS**? Unless, of course, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are with God as we speak. The LORD who was the God who saved, protected, and delivered the fathers of the nation did not do so to preside over their eternal death. God is still their God and they still honour, praise, and love their LORD and God.

The very Scriptures, so close to the heart of every Sadducee, witness to their inability to read aright. As far as Luke's Gospel is concerned, that is the last we'll here of the Sadducees. It is not, however, the last we will hear of resurrection.

Joseph O'Hanlon.

