

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (C), November 7, 2010

2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14; 2 Thessalonians 2.16-3:5; Luke 20:27-38

The Living God of the Living

David Hollenbach, S.J.

November is the time of the church year for remembering our dead. Last week, on All Saints and All Souls Days, the church celebrated and prayed for all who have gone before us into the mystery of death. So we can ask ourselves: what do we really believe happens after death? A very important question in itself, and also because our understanding of death has such an impact on our understanding of life. The gospel today pushes us even further, for in it Jesus tells us that what we believe about death shapes the way we think about God.

In the gospel Jesus is debating with the Sadducees "who deny the Resurrection." They try to trap Jesus in a battle over the meaning of Scripture. They quote a law from the book of Deuteronomy that requires that if a married man dies without children, his brother should take that man's widow as his wife, to beget a child for his late brother, and thus to keep the dead man's name going in the family line. This law existed because when it was established the Jewish people didn't believe in life-after-death. To them, the only way of overcoming death was by having children, so that, in a way, they would live on in their descendants.

Jesus counters by citing one of the most important texts of the Hebrew Bible, the revelation of God to Moses at the burning bush. You recall the story.

The people of Israel are enslaved in Egypt. Moses himself goes out into the desert. On Mount Horeb he sees a bush on fire. When he realizes the bush is not being burned up, he approaches so see what is going on. In fact, it is a theophany—a manifestation of the actual presence of God. As Moses approaches the bush, God speaks to him: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” Moses hides his face, for he is afraid to look at God. When he gets back his courage, he asks: what is your name. God responds: “I am who am. . . . Tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you.”

This is extraordinary. God’s name is “I AM.” What can this possibly mean? This name of God—which in English we render as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah”—was so sacred to the Jewish people that they were not allowed to say it or even write it. Instead, when they refer to God they simply call God “the LORD” But what does the mysterious name “I AM” revealed at the bush mean?

It means something like I am and cannot not be. Some philosophers have tried to explain this by saying that it means God is “pure being.” “I am am-ness.” There is no time when God was not or will not be.

This is very metaphysical stuff. Jesus explains it much more concretely. He tells the Sadducees that they are wrong about resurrection because they don’t understand who God really is. He tells them: God is the God of the living, not of the dead. “I am” means I am alive—totally, completely alive. To be the living God

is to be essentially alive and overflowing with life. God not only will not die, but cannot die. In effect God tells Moses, and us: “Death has nothing to do with me and I have nothing to do with death.”

One further aspect of the story of the bush is important. Not only does God tell Moses that his name is “I am.” God asks Moses to tell the people enslaved in Egypt: “I will be with you. I will to lead you out of the misery and death of Egypt into the land flowing with milk and honey—the land of fullness of life.” This has led some scholars to note that the Hebrew name of God usually translated “I am” could also be translated “I am with you,” or as “I will be with you as who I am.” If God is essentially and totally alive, for him to be with us is to have the fullness of life! The God of the living wants his people to be alive, totally, forever. For this reason, Jesus tells the Sadducees, you are wrong about resurrection because you are wrong about God. The living God is the God of the living, not of the dead.

God is the God of the living, and that means us, now and forever. Though children are great gift, there is no need to worry about having children to carry on one’s memory. Though making a name for oneself that will be remembered when one dies can be of importance, not doing so is finally no loss. The God of the living is with and for us all, including us humble and minor characters in life’s drama. All of us will continue to share the life of the living God, who is always with us. This promise from God is the source of our hope of everlasting life.

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