Sermon

Pentecost XI

10/11/19

Eltham

**Readings**

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Psalm 145:1-5,17-21

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-17

Luke 20:27-40

+FSHS

“How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” When you hear that rhetorical question, what that usually signifies is an argument reduction ad absurdam – that the debate at hand has become a fruitless and frustrating splitting of hairs. It’s supposed to refer back to Aquinas and Duns Scotus’ use of dialectical or scholastic method based in turn on Aristotle (who was all the rage in the Parisian academie after being rediscovered thanks to the Spanish Moors in the late 12th/early 13th C). As it turns out, the scholastics never actually explored that question. They did contemplate ad nauseam the question of whether and how the bread and wine in the eucharist are the body and blood of Christ, and they came up with some extraordinary metaphysics which led to transubstantion. Their questions did include one speculating about whether, if a mouse eats the blessed sacrament while reserved in the tabernacle, it has received the body and blood of Christ, and other such things. But while they did contemplate angelology, they never speculated about the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin; that was a charge concocted by the reformers in the 16th C to discredit Aquinas and his mates.

What we hear the Sadducees put to Jesus in the gospel reading is similarly a ridiculous distortion of a principle in the law of Moses which stated that if a man died without having children, his wife was to marry the man’s brother, and the children he had by her would be classed as his brother’s. It was a way to keep the family line going, and to keep property (including women) in the family. Something which was designed as a safeguard for kinship and familial structure is used by the Sadducees for a completely alien purpose: to discredit and make ridiculous the notion of resurrection. In Jesus’ time one of the dividing debates in religious circles was whether there was a resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees said, yes. The Sadducees, who were the wealthy elite who’d formed relationships of codependence with the Roman authorities said, no. Because you see, belief in the resurrection of the dead is politically dangerous, and could lead to all sorts of brave acts of martyrdom and the founding of new religious movements… So the Sadducees had a political interest in maintaining their own power and position by dismissing the dangerous idea of resurrection. Eat, drink, be merry, wield power and live the good life, for tomorrow everyone’s dead and that’s it. At the time there were similar ridiculous scenarios which were used by each side to score points over the other – and that’s what they’re trying to do to Jesus – to score points and to prove him wrong or mad. The whole of the chapter is about people trying to test Jesus and challenge his thinking, and his vision of the realm of God.

And typically, Jesus blows everything out of the water: those who are deemed worthy of a place in the life hereafter aren’t married or given in marriage but are like angels. The life of the world to come isn’t about preserving genealogy or kinship ties knotted together by procreation. It won’t be just an everlasting continuance of what has been, but is of a completely different order. And moreover, he says, check your scriptures, guys. Because when God appears to Moses, God declares Godself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Present tense: I am… not I was or have been. The God of the living, not the dead. Or: While those who are dead are dead to us, they are alive to God. This is why we affirm in the creed that we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

But there’s a whole lot more to this than just a proof text of Jesus’ own words for beliefs in a statement of faith. Once again Jesus stands things on their head, and we’re brought face to face with an inverted mirror which challenges how we fundamentally think about and structure our worldview. The realm of God – which spans all that which is alive to God in every time and place – is a radical reality. It’s embodied – and bodies matter. One of the liberating notes in what Jesus indicates in saying “they are like angels” is that there is no male or female; gender is not an object that defines in the realm of God. Which means that women are not pawns or property to be used, and their bodies are no longer the places where politics are played out by men. I suspect that for the majority of us here, we would support a woman’s right to choose to have an abortion, and if so, to have such a procedure in a safe and sterile facility. But this is another example of a political question still very active in some quarters today where the woman’s body is a place of dispute. If we applied the logic Jesus uses here, I suspect he’d be on the woman’s side, not pro or anti abortion (or the so-called “right to life” however you define that), but pointing out that this dispute is about the use and abuse of power and who has it and who has a right to decide what happens with other people’s bodies.

Of course, as we’re all aware from what’s going on and unfolding in our church, a similar debate is raging, and like the 1st C question put to Jesus, it’s about biblical interpretation and reductios ad absurdam. And once again, the bodies of those who are othered by patriarchal dominance become the battleground for a hermeneutic debate. I’m pretty sure Jesus wouldn’t be pro or anti people engaging in loving mutual relationships, but would be firmly in the corner with those whose bodies are the places torn apart by the use and misuse of power, the real argument being about who has it and the right to wield it.

And what stinks about both these issues is that they embody precisely what the realm of God is not about: division, othering of those we disagree with, judging of others, and our own damned need to be always right (and righteous). Jesus’ embodiment of the realm of God, which yes, includes his resurrection in Luke’s gospel, challenges all these perspectives, and the constant squabbling of God’s children over who’s right and who’s wrong. He points us to a bigger picture, a picture characterized by God’s own life, and God’s own approach to power. Which is not to hurl thunderbolts, but to become a helpless baby. Not to lead an army in triumph to the gates of Jerusalem, but to ride a donkey in a ragtag procession and then die in humiliation at the hands of those who couldn’t stand the challenge to their power he represented. And all of this: because God is the God of the living, not of the dead. God is the God of life, the energy at work which brings creation and creativity, the Spirit who breathes and all things take a breath.

This is something important for us to grasp too as we come to our AGM, reflecting on the year that has been and the year that is yet to unfold. We have much to be thankful for about the year that has been, and for what so many people have done in living the realm of God in and through St Margaret’s. It’s so easy to look at some of the statistics and to be disheartened; to look around and feel anxiety and despair about the future because we are waiting for seeds to sprout, and we don’t know whether or how they will. But to tie this into what we’ve been reflecting on in the gospel reading today: we need to hold onto what Jesus says when he declares God to be the God of the living, not of the dead. And we need to open our eyes and step into seeing things through the lenses of the realm of God. God’s life is at work here at St Margaret’s. We are the people of the living God, and we have life because Jesus’ Spirit breathes in and through us and is doing a new thing. (Pathways tree) Many new things. We are the people of the living God, called to live holy inbreathed lives through which the realm of God which resists the ways earthly power is used and abused is embodied. And that means we are open to God’s future, to the exciting and breathtaking possibilities this coming year offers to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. May we indeed be imbued with those life-giving energies of the Spirit of God, with the presence of Jesus in our lives and our hearts, and may we be those through whom the kingdom of God comes in glory.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**