

Is there Life After Death? written by Sarah Ashton

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen

I am going to start with a spoiler alert. The title for this morning's sermon is 'Is there life after death?' Even reading the Bible and prayer does not give me the ability to prove to any one that there is life after death, but I do know what I believe and that comes through my faith.

The Gospel reading this morning contains the sort of question that people who want to trip you up ask. They want you to flounder in your answer and doubt your own beliefs. It is the Sadducees who are questioning Jesus and trying to trip him up.

The Sadducees had an aristocratic background with a worldly, rather than spiritual outlook and were politically very active. Jerusalem was where most of them lived and the Temple and its administration were their primary interest. They represented the wealthy and sophisticated in Jewish society and they were happy to compromise with both secular and pagan leaders and were unorthodox in their Jewish theological beliefs. They were few in number but powerful as they controlled the high priesthood at the time of Jesus and held the majority of seats in the Sanhedrin. The high priest was responsible for the worship in the Temple and the Sanhedrin was the Jewish Supreme Council, which was led by a high priest and responsible for judgements on all matters religious, civil and criminal.

Amongst their unorthodox beliefs were only accepting the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch or written Torah) as authoritative; rejecting out of hand the Oral Traditions that support the written laws of the Torah that were believed to have been given to Moses alongside the Torah on Mt Sinai; and not believing in resurrection or an afterlife or angels. They did believe that they were living in a Messianic Age, which to them was an ideal time, and that it should be preserved.

Orthodox Jewish belief differs from the Sadducees on the concept of the afterlife. Jews believe in a resurrection of the dead and an ultimate reward for the righteous. Texts describe Sheol as a shadowy underworld where the dead reside awaiting resurrection. The book of Daniel (ch 12) suggests that the dead will be brought back to life at some point, associated with the coming of the Messiah. Jews also believe in the immortality of the soul; the teaching for this is found in the Book of Wisdom, which is in the Apocrypha, and it describes immortality as life with God in heaven and the reward for righteousness and martyrdom.

I hope I have now set the scene for the question that the Sadducees ask Jesus. The law that they are referencing is in Deuteronomy (25 v 5) "If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her". This law was to protect the widow as she would otherwise have no-one else to turn to, and to ensure the continuation of the family line. The Sadducee takes the scenario to an extreme point in that the woman is widowed seven times by seven brothers and there were no children. Now when the woman dies, if there is an afterlife, who would the widow be married to?

Jesus, doesn't give a straight answer to the question. He talks about 'this age', which he has referred to in ch18 when he is talking about the current time being an age of sin and misery; 'this age' is the one where people are given to each other in marriage. However, there is a future age to be brought about by the return of the Messiah, which will bring eternal life. This future age will be for those who are considered worthy and the resurrection will not be on earthly lines. There will be no marriage, children or death in the new age, those who are able to take part in this will be like angels, God's children or creations. Jesus' answer goes against the Sadducees belief in the current Messianic Age and talks of angels who they don't acknowledge.

Quickly he moves on to say that even Moses believed in resurrection. The Sadducees respected Moses as he wrote the Torah, and in Exodus (ch3) an angel appears to Moses in a burning bush and he speaks with 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'. Jesus then says that God is

not the God of the dead but of the living because to God all are alive and this implies that there is a spiritual life after physical death.

In the passage we have heard from Job, he is confident of a life after death. He believes that despite all the bad things that have happened to him, God will see him as a faithful and true servant and he will be vindicated. This may well be after his own death but he will see God and have a life with Him, as physical death is not the end of existence.

Christian belief is in the promise of Eternal Life, this is granted to those who have faith in Jesus and live their lives according His teachings.

John 3 v16 is probably the verse that everyone knows to support this belief 'For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life'. It is not about living forever; it is about living in the presence of God without pain or suffering. It is Jesus' death and resurrection that is the key to this passage. God was prepared to give everything for us, including His Son.

One of the claims that Jesus made about himself in John's Gospel (ch 11 v25) is "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die". This passage is a reassurance to Christians that death is not the end but a transition to a new existence with God.

In John 14 (v2-3) Jesus says "In my Father's house are many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" this highlights the belief in a heavenly home prepared for believers.

Paul writes in Romans 6 (v23) "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Life after death with God is a gift from God who has been so generous to us already.

As I said at the beginning, I cannot prove that there is life after death but the scriptures certainly point to it quite firmly. When I was teaching there was a story written by Doris Stickney that I used to try and help the young people understand the concept of something that they could not see or have a first-hand account about and I am going to tell it to you now.

Waterbugs and Dragonflies: Doris Stickney

Down below the surface of a quiet pond lived a little colony of water bugs. They were a happy colony, living far away from the sun. For many months they were very busy, scurrying over the soft mud on the bottom of the pond. They did notice that every once in a while, one of their colony seemed to lose interest in going about. Clinging to the stem of a pond lily it gradually moved out of sight and was seen no more.

"Look!" said one of the water bugs to another. "One of our colony is climbing up the lily stalk. Where do you think she is going?" Up, up, up it slowly went.... Even as they watched, the water bug disappeared from sight. Its friends waited and waited but it didn't return...

"That's funny!" said one water bug to another. "Wasn't she happy here?" asked a second... "Where do you suppose she went?" wondered a third.

No one had an answer. They were greatly puzzled. Finally, one of the water bugs, a leader in the colony, gathered its friends together. "I have an idea". The next one of us who climbs up the lily stalk must promise to come back and tell us where he or she went and why."

"We promise", they said solemnly.

One spring day, not long after, the very water bug who had suggested the plan found himself climbing up the lily stalk. Up, up, up, he went. Before he knew what was happening, he had broken through the surface of the water and fallen onto the broad, green lily pad above.

When he awoke, he looked about with surprise. He couldn't believe what he saw. A startling change had come to his old body. His movement revealed four silver wings and a long tail. Even as he struggled, he felt an impulse to move his wings...The warmth of the sun soon dried the moisture from the new body. He moved his wings again and suddenly found himself up above the water. He had become a dragonfly!!

Swooping and dipping in great curves, he flew through the air. He felt exhilarated in the new atmosphere. By and by the new dragonfly lighted happily on a lily pad to rest. Then it was that he chanced to look below to the bottom of the pond. Why, he was right above his old friends, the water bugs! There they were scurrying around, just as he had been doing some time before.

The dragonfly remembered the promise: "The next one of us who climbs up the lily stalk will come back and tell where he or she went and why." Without

thinking, the dragonfly darted down. Suddenly he hit the surface of the water and bounced away. Now that he was a dragonfly, he could no longer go into the water...

"I can't return!" he said in dismay. "At least, I tried. But I can't keep my promise. Even if I could go back, not one of the water bugs would know me in my new body. I guess I'll just have to wait until they become dragonflies too. Then they'll understand what has happened to me, and where I went."

And the dragonfly winged off happily into its wonderful new world of sun and air.....

As I said at the beginning of my sermon, I truly believe in life after death and that one day I will be like the dragonfly and be with God in his heavenly kingdom