

Reading: Mark 12:18-27

In 1216 quite suddenly, the Pope died. No one and nothing can stop death: not popes and princes, not wealth and status. The mournful and hauntingly beautiful sounds of Gregorian chant filled the cathedral as the body of Pope Innocent III lay in state. He lay in front of the high altar, covered in rich gold and silver ornaments and jewels. Cardinals, abbots, emperors and endless queues of the faithful filed past to contemplate his remains. By midnight all the mournful had retired and only the flickering of candles remained. His own servants knew about the jewels set in silver and gold. They entered the cathedral secretly, and within minutes had stripped the body of its precious vestments, and everything of value. His naked body lay there, unadorned in any way. After all, you just can't take it with you.

A poor, dirty, wretched, little man was hiding in a dark corner of the cathedral to keep vigil near his friend. He took off his torn and patched tunic then went forward and covered his friend. They had become friends when the beggar had met with the pope. The beggar's name ...? We know him as Francis of Assisi.

Jesus is faced today in our reading with an impossible question - impossible for us, at any rate. It's along the lines of what happens when we die, except it's more complicated than that. It comes in Mark's gospel after a whole wave of difficult questions. Jesus is approaching his last hours and the leaders seem intent on catching him out. There's the question on taxes, on his authority, on forgiveness and then one on the first commandment. At this time the Sadducees make an appearance. They are landowning men who sit on the Jewish Council. They have authority. They have money. They have status. They dream up a question that really has no basis in reality. A woman marries 7 times and then dies. (The number 7 is important.) Whose wife will she be at the resurrection?

Sadducees only follow the first five books of the Bible. They don't believe in the resurrection. They aren't even really interested in the answer. The question is just to test Jesus. Jesus is staunch, both in his belief in the resurrection and in his rebuke of their teaching. "You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" He says. He even quotes Moses back to them, and concludes, in a sure to get you crucified way, "You are quite wrong." He quoted a common rabbinical teaching of the day "For when they rise from the dead they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." In other words, you can't begin to get your head around what resurrection life will be like. *Behold God will do a new thing.*

When I was young and trying to understand what had happened to my grandfather when he died, I asked my dad. Dad didn't always come through with the goods but this time he was on the money. "Do you remember that old umbrella I had?" he said, "When it was good, it was great, but now it is worn out so I got a new one. Grandad's body is worn out and it is time for God to give him a new one." "What's his new body like?" I asked. "It is like the caterpillar becoming a butterfly," he said. *Behold God will do a new thing.*

The challenge (and this is me now not my father long ago), is to begin to live the resurrected life now. The good news is that the love of God is not pie in the sky when we die, but right here and now. When we are baptised we have already died and been raised to new life with God. In us, God is doing a new thing. We can enjoy new life now as we die daily to the sin that holds us back. St Paul said to put on Christ like a garment. It is a garment made of love and St Paul breaks down the attributes of that love: kindness, charity, self control, joy and, I would want to add, gratitude. The good news is that God's new life begins now. The even better news is that the new life we find in Christ continues beyond death in ways we can only guess at. *God is doing a new thing.* We can be assured with certainty, that, just as Pope Innocent was clothed by his friend Francis after his death, so much more will our dearest friend Christ, clothe us with the garment of immortality.

Mercy In Our Time wrote Nancy Hopkins, a twentieth century poet.

Let not mistaken mercy
blind my fading sight,
no false euphoria lull me.

I would not unprepared
take this last journey.
Give me a light to guide me
through dark valleys,
a staff to lean upon,
bread to sustain me,
a blessing in my ear
that fear may not assail me.

Then leaving do not hold my hand,
I go to meet a friend -
the same who traced
compassion in the sand.

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus You are raised from the dead and we are risen with You.

Help us to know both the power of God and the meaning of the Scriptures,
that You are alive forever.

Lord Jesus You are doing a new thing, help us to always turn our lives in the
direction of Your love,

keep us from being blocks to Your grace and mercy.

Look kindly on Your world Lord.

Help us as we struggle to bring peace and justice.

May Your light shine on lands of conflict and on our divisions and wars.

Strengthen the hand of peace makers and people of good will that we might
learn to live in peace.

Bless those who this day may die. And those who watch on, may we know
the power of Your love to hold fast our dear ones, and those we mourn.

We uphold the sick especially,

Strengthen the work of Your church especially, our Bishop Victoria, the work
of the people here as we grow in numbers and depth.

May we, having seen the light of Christ, be salt and light for the world.

Silence.

In all we do and say grant us grace to be Your resurrection people.

In Christ's name we ask it.

Amen