

On not complicating resurrection

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 6 November 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 22

Contemporary Reading (see below); Luke 20: 27-38

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

from **Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness** by Ilia Delio

Heaven is earth transformed by love, when earthly life is lived in love; the suffering of earth is transformed into a foretaste of heaven when one sees and hears from the inner centre of love. Even in heaven the wounds of suffering will not be removed but will be transformed by divine love into new and eternal life. Heaven is not a place of eternal rest or a long sleep-in, but a life of creativity and newness in love; one with God in the transformation of all things...

One might think, on face value, that the self-creation of heaven and hell conflicts with the scriptures, but in fact, the gospel message is based on invitation and choice... The question of heaven is not one of worthiness before God but accepting God's invitation for life: "*I have set before you life and death, choose life*" (Deuteronomy 30:19)...

Without the choice for a new level of consciousness, there can be no new reality or reign of God. Where our minds focus, there our treasure lies. As Rabbi Shapiro writes, "*I made the choice for heaven and, having done so, I went in search of tools for living it.*" When Teilhard de Chardin said that we are evolution made conscious of itself, he indicated a basic lesson of modern science: there is no real "world" apart from us; rather, the world unfolds in and through our choices and actions. So Rabbi Shapiro asks:

Will you engage this moment with kindness or with cruelty, with love or with fear, with generosity or scarcity, with a joyous heart or an embittered one? This is your choice and no one can make it for you. If you choose kindness, love, generosity, and joy, then you will discover in that choice the Kingdom of God, heaven, nirvana, this-worldly salvation. If you choose cruelty, fear, scarcity, and bitterness, then you will discover in that choice the hellish states of which so many religions speak. These are not ontological realities tucked away somewhere in space—these are existential realities playing out in your own mind. Heaven and hell are both inside of you. It is your choice that determines just where you will reside.

~~~~~

A number of years ago, Penny and I were exploring the possibility of employment with a wonderful pioneering female bishop. In the course of her hospitality she introduced us to a fellow, nearby, bishop in case he also had a parish to offer us to work in. He however took one brief look at us, and, at once, abruptly asked '*do you believe in the Resurrection?*' It was said in a very demanding, and almost accusatory, tone. Taken aback though we were, we actually responded very well, saying together, and in a somewhat incredulous tone, '*why yes, of course!*' The bishop was nonetheless not at all impressed and exited immediately. For, of course, his question was not one to which he really expected an answer, or at least one in which he was actually interested.

Like the notorious enquiry ‘*when did you stop hitting your wife?*’, it was a deliberately loaded question, containing its own assumptions. Like the Sadducees’ question to Jesus in today’s Gospel reading, it was also not really about resurrection at all. How often, I wonder, are our own questions like that too? When we talk in faith spaces, how much do our own interests intrude? How do we keep open to the mystery of resurrection?

As many Sunday School children have been taught, the Sadducees are probably best known for not believing in resurrection. For this reason, as the old saying goes, they were Sad(d)-u-cee. Actually, the name Sadducee probably relates to Zadok, the first High Priest of ancient Israel, in the time of Solomon and the First Temple of Jerusalem. For the Sadducees were one of the leading groups which arose in the times of domination of Judaea by other nations, in the later time of the Second Temple.

As their name suggests, they represented tradition, particularly that associated with the Temple, not least the priests. This, after all, had given such founding strength and a continuing framework of life for the people of Israel. Far from being ‘Sad-u-cee’, they were actually typically aristocratic, including those who held and maintained the wealth and status of Israel and its faith.

By Jesus’ day, as Judaea was colonised by successive foreign empires, not only had alternative faith understandings arisen, but the most brutal subjection was now well advanced under the even greater power of Rome. In the year 70 of the Common Era the Second Temple was destroyed, and with it the Sadducees version of faith.

The revolt of radicals and the pitiless revenge of the Romans ended such traditional Judaeian religion. In its place arose rabbinic Judaism, built on the inspiration of the Pharisee movement. This is the context of the question the Sadducees put to Jesus. They were worried, not only for their own power and influence, but for the good order of the faith of Israel which they had so long cultivated and which Jesus and other radicals were threatening.

Like the bishop who queried Penny and I, the Sadducees were not really interested in Jesus’ answer. It was a loaded question. Indeed, they were seeking to use the tools of their main faith opponents – the Pharisees – against them. They wanted to ridicule the whole idea of resurrection, which both Jesus and the Pharisees, and others, shared. For why do people believe in resurrection, and why do you think the idea of resurrection came into being at all?

The answer is surely related to social location and crisis. If you are comfortable in your life, as many people are in the rich parts of our world, it is surely less of a pressing existential need. Like the Sadducees in their day, you are already tasting the fruits of worldly heaven. You, or your people, own most of the land and the media. You direct the work and limits of others. You curate the dominant stories of society for people’s consumption and you sponsor the petty distractions to use up their potentially rebellious energies – whether it is via religion, or sport, or ‘popular’ entertainment.

You also know the power of religion, so you turn it to your own ends. You even reconstruct the truly revolutionary idea of resurrection– making of it a hypothetical postponed reward for behaving as you would like, or for avoiding punishment for not adhering to your codes and demands.

Historically, the idea of resurrection arises from a very different space. It comes out of the shattering of worldly power and wealth, and the end of ordinary human hope. It emerges out of socio-economic, political, and cultural, as well as religious, despair.

It is intimately linked to devastating experiences of communal as well as personal suffering: of invasion, exile (literal and metaphorical), and violence of all kinds. It is born of empire, and colonial dispossession. No wonder then that the Sadducees had a very restricted basis for faith. Why did they need a different world, and one which turned power and expectations upside down? It is not surprising then that they insisted on the written Torah alone and interpreted even such scripture narrowly, as we see in the very literal use of the principle of levitical marriage in their question to Jesus.

In contrast, progressives such as the Pharisees affirmed a much wider basis for faith, drawing on the oral Torah, and the prophets, not least Isaiah, who spoke in sometimes powerful images of resurrection hope. As successive empires swept away the pride of the people of Israel, destroyed lives and inflicted misery, resurrection appeared ever more important. For when devastation reigns, when human efforts come to nothing, with no end in sight – where then do we find hope, consolation, and the strength to fight back?

Not for nothing is resurrection, in a variety of forms, part of Judaism and Islam, as well as integral to other faith traditions, such as Zoroastrianism. For it emphasises the centrality of God's justice and compassion, at the very heart of all healthy faith. Despite how the world is, and who is in control, and their subtle or not so subtle oppressions and propaganda, it proclaims that God's love and mercy will prevail, come what may. For ultimately God is not bound by any human constructs, and will set God's beloved ones free. Resurrection, in this deep sense, is thus the ultimate affirmation of God, and of trust in that enduring, and always extraordinary, reality.

If we go back to the Sadducees' question, we see how very, very, ordinary is their thinking, devoid of divine mystery. Significantly, they are asking about marriage. Well, of course they are! Like modern day religious reactionaries, they are obsessed with marriage because, of course, marriage was, and sadly still remains, so tied up with power, wealth and status. Marriage then, and in many constructions today, was a principal means of maintaining order, particularly patriarchal, sexual, gender, and racial conventions. The Sadducees' question is therefore not really about resurrection, except to ridicule it, but about maintaining order. Jesus' answer is therefore unexpected and revolutionary.

Jesus shatters expectations and speculations about resurrection and any heaven attached to it. Most shockingly perhaps, even for today's audiences, Jesus declares marriage to be of no ultimate concern: whether in patriarchal forms, or perhaps even, as for us, in those based on marriage equality. Indeed, even more than that, Jesus is associating marriage with a world in which death reigns, not as an eternal verity. Without undermining them, Jesus is simply not obsessed with marriage and sexual ethics, as too many people have been in the past and remain so today. Rather, Jesus is saying something quite different, and much more extraordinary.

How do you sit with Jesus' response? If we're looking for a specific answer to what resurrection, or heaven, is, it is not all that conclusive, is it?! What on earth does it mean to say that, in the resurrection, 'they (we) are like angels and children of God'? Does it make much common sense? Well, no, it doesn't, because, in drawing us into resurrection faith, it is precisely designed to take us beyond common sense - whether conservative or progressive.

Let us be clear. Like any other central doctrine of Christian Faith, we do need to be able to express resurrection reasonably. We need to explore it in relation to other human insights into consciousness and cosmology. That is the point of our first, contemporary, reading this morning.

As Ilia Delio spells out, both our faith understandings of resurrection and heaven and the best understandings of science and reason should inform one another. When they do, they then deeply enrich each other. For the heart of both Scripture and of modern science involves enlarging our consciousness of life wherever it exists.

*'Do you believe in the Resurrection?'* A key problem with that question, whether asked by a conservative or a progressive, is often the assumptions behind it. Both conservatives and progressives typically attach their/our own limited interpretations and are looking to see if the respondent is part of their tribe, or part of their agenda.

Like the Sadducees, we can also be caught up too easily in *'down to earth'* considerations, and regard heaven too as something which is essentially a continuation of, or simply an end to, life as we know it now. Instead, we are called into divine mystery, into a deeper participation with God, *'to live as angels.'* As Ilia Delio puts it: *'heaven is not a place of rest or a long sleep-in, but a life of creativity and newness in love; one with God in the transformation of all things.'*

That sounds a little more extraordinary, doesn't it, than simply continuing our lives here but with eternal superannuation and guaranteed first class health care?!

This morning we do several important things, including admitting new members-in-association to the Uniting Church through our Pitt Street community and blessing and commissioning our new Church Council. In both cases, it is possible to become hung up on specifics. It is good therefore to be reminded of the bigger vision and the calling of God to resurrection. As part of this, I hope that we will continue to reflect further on angels, and what it is *'to live as angels'*. We have wonderful opportunities to do so with the Queer Angels project and with Advent and Christmas, great seasons of angels, coming up. For the moment however, let me leave us with two brief starters for reflection.

The first starter is that angels are intimately linked with God, as divine companions as well as divine messengers. That, I think, is part of why Jesus pairs *'living as angels'* with living as *'children of God'*. For this is also our calling and destiny, alongside and at the heart of any other worldly calling we may have, even to marriage. Ilia Delio again puts it well, when she says that *'heaven is earth transformed by love, when earthly life is lived with love'*. When we do that, beyond our own interests and ideas, then *'the suffering of earth is transformed into a foretaste of heaven'* – as we then see and hear *'from the inner centre of love'*. For *'the inner centre of love'* is the heart of Creation and of Resurrection.

My second take-away starter for reflection on *'living as angels'* complements this. It is to recall again the words of the child in the book *Mister God, This is Anna*. *'The difference from a person and an angel is easy'*, she says: *'most of an angel is in the inside and most of a person is on the outside.'* Angels don't have gaps in them like people do – gaps marked *'fear'*, *'greed'*, or (need for) *'success'*, *'affirmation'*, *'dependency'* – or, simply, *'new car'*, *'new house'*, *'more money'*, *'more status'* – always living incomplete, unlike an angel who is whole. Or, as Rabbi Shapiro puts it, whatever your philosophical conceptions of life and death, marriage or the angels: *'will you engage this moment with kindness or with cruelty, with love or with fear?... Heaven and hell are both inside of you. It is your choice that determines just where you will reside.'*

In the glorious presence of God the all-compassionate,

surrounded by the angels in heaven and on earth. Amen.