

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and pray the gathering prayer based on Sirach 39.1-3 and John 8.32.

LEADER: Let us devote ourselves to the study of the law of God.

ALL: Wise and loving God, help us know the truth.

LEADER: Let us seek out the wisdom of the ancients, preserve their discourse, penetrate the subtleties of parables, find the hidden meaning of proverbs.

ALL: Wise and loving God, help us know the truth.

LEADER: Let us be at home with all God's word leaves unsaid.

ALL: The truth will make us free.

November is the last month of the Church year. Sunday's gospel comes from near the end of Luke's gospel. Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem that begins in Luke 9.51 is over. He arrives in the city in chapter 19. Many turn out to welcome him. Then Jesus cleanses the temple and causes an uproar.

The temple courtyards are Jerusalem's central public space. People come to the temple to pray and interact with each other. Jesus comes to the courtyard each day to teach. His actions in the temple stir up opponents. Other teachers, priests, and leaders want to debate Jesus on the hot religious topics of the day.

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SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

This Sunday, some conservative Sadducees make an extreme case of observing one of Israel's 613 laws in order to argue resurrection is ridiculous. The law obligates a surviving brother to marry his widowed sister-in-law if the brother dies without fathering an heir.

Jesus shows himself a skilled rabbi, able to interpret and argue from Israel's scriptures. In Jewish tradition, learning is communal. Students question, argue, debate with one another.

Questions invite curiosity and broaden thinking. Conversations can even transform us.

Talking about politics challenges us to keep conversation civil and constructive. Some of us get shushed to preserve friendships and family relationships. But democracy and Catholic social

teaching require thinking together, hearing more than ourselves, and learning the needs of people left out.

The Second Vatican Council emphasizes the common good, "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (Church in the Modern World #26).

The common good requires the hard work of weighing and balancing competing needs. It's work in which we must all participate. "Every group must take into account the needs and legitimate aspirations of every other group, and even those of the human family as a whole" (#26).

● What points of view besides your own have you learned to take seriously?

Young rabbis study, talk, & debate together.



GOSPEL

Jesus argues for resurrection.

NARRATOR: Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came forward to Jesus to pose this problem.

SADDUCEE: Teacher, Moses wrote that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife and no child, the brother shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Suppose there were seven brothers. The first one married and died childless, so the second brother married the widow, then the third, and so on. All seven died without leaving her any children. Finally the widow herself died. At the resurrection, whose wife will she be? Remember, seven married her.

JESUS 1: Those who belong to this age marry and are given in



marriage, but those judged worthy of a place in the age to come and of resurrection from the dead do not. They cannot die anymore because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.

JESUS 2: Moses in the passage about the bush showed that the dead rise again when he called Yahweh the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. God is not God of the dead but of the living. All are alive to God.

Luke 20.27-38

Jesus argues that all are alive to God.

Sunday's gospel is a controversy story, a literary form with little narrative action and a simple question-and-answer format. Early Christians used this literary form to put Jesus' sayings into dialog with questions they faced after he was gone from their midst.

For a 21st-century hearer, Sunday's gospel raises many questions. Who are the Sadducees? What do they believe? What law of Moses commands brothers to marry their childless, widowed sisters-in-law? Did people really keep this law? What exactly is Jesus'

point about what God tells Moses in the passage about the bush? How does this passage show the dead are raised?

● **What questions does this gospel raise for you?**

More than many gospels, Sunday's controversy story resists interpretation unless we learn about the beliefs and practices of the religious sects in Jesus' time, namely, Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, and Essenes. They have strikingly different attitudes toward the Roman authorities,

toward the interpretation of Israel's scriptures, and toward what the future holds.

The Sadducee who questions Jesus in Sunday's gospel belongs to the group that has authority over temple activities, authority which they receive from the ruling Romans. The Sadducees are very conservative. For them, only Torah—the first five books of Moses—is holy scripture.

In this, they differ from the Pharisees, who include the prophets and wisdom literature among the writings they regard as holy. By limiting their beliefs to Torah, Sadducees reject belief in angels or the spirit world, belief in a messiah to come, or belief in the resurrection. On these points they oppose the Pharisees.

The Sadducee in Sunday's gospel seeks to embroil Jesus in the controversy his group has with the Pharisees about resurrection. The temple, the special domain of the Sadducees, is the setting of Sunday's gospel.

In the Sadducees' view, the case of the woman with seven husbands demonstrates the foolishness of resurrection. Which brother will be her husband in the afterlife?

● **How have questions helped you learn more about scripture?**

● **How are the differences between Sadducees and Pharisees like ours in our religious lives today?**

The Sadducee's case extends an Old Testament law, called the Levirate law, to an absurd degree. Most bibles have a cross-referencing system that cites other parts of scripture to which a passage refers.

Using such cross-referencing tools one can learn that Luke 20.28 refers to Deuteronomy 25.5, the Mosaic command that a brother marry his widowed sister-in-law. One can also find that in Luke 20.37 Jesus is quoting Exodus 3.6, where God tells Moses, "I am the God of your ancestors."

Both Deuteronomy and Exodus are among the first five books of the bible, Torah. The Sadducee presents a case against resurrection from the fifth book of Torah, and Jesus refutes him with an argument from Exodus, the second book of Torah.

Deuteronomy 25.5 obligates the brother of a man who dies with no child to perpetuate his name by taking the widow as his own wife. This is the Levirate law.

Children born from this union are the legal heirs and descendants of the dead brother. Implicit in this practice, well-known in Jesus' time, is a biological understanding of immortality. One lives forever through one's offspring.

Jesus' answer recognizes the Sadducee's real issue has nothing to do with the hypothetical case of a woman with seven husbands but focuses on the denial

of resurrection. Jesus dismisses the Sadducees' assumption that life in the resurrection will be identical to life on earth. He insists this life will not depend on marriage and biological immortality.

Then Jesus substantiates his claim by arguing from a verse in the story of the burning bush from Exodus 3. Here modern readers need to remember the first book of Torah is Genesis, which tells the sagas of Israel's earliest ancestors—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. The book of Genesis ends in Egypt, where Jacob and his family find food during a famine.

Exodus, the second book of Torah, begins some generations later when the Pharaoh of Egypt has forced the descendants of Jacob into slavery to build his cities. In Exodus 3, God hears the cries of these enslaved descendants and calls Moses to free them. God speaks to Moses from a burning bush, "I am the God of your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Where is the argument for resurrection in these words? Sources such as the Dead Sea Scrolls show Jesus practicing the type of biblical interpretation contemporary in his day. Jesus argues that God's words to Moses in Exodus 3 show that the ancestors



Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive to God, and therefore must have been raised from the dead.

His argument convinces his audience. Jesus beats the Sadducees at their own game; he uses their scriptures to prove the validity of belief in the resurrection.

- When have you used scriptures to debate points of doctrine?
- How do you use the bible in your own life? How does the bible help you in making life decisions?
- How do the scriptures and Catholic social teachings guide you in discerning the needs of our nation?



The Creator can restore life.

Sunday's first reading comes from 2 Maccabees, one of a collection of sacred texts called the *second* or *deutero* canon. A canon is the list of books a religious group considers as its holy scriptures.

The Roman Catholic canon includes the deutero-canonical books, including Maccabees, Sirach, Wisdom, Tobit, Judith; the Protestant canon terms these books *apocryphal*, outside the canon. The Pharisees and Sadducees had the same kind of difference over whether the later writings were as important and normative for the community as the earlier writings.

The setting for 2 Maccabees 7 is the Greek persecution of the Jews about 170 B.C. The Greek ruler in Palestine, Antiochus IV, instituted a series of loyalty tests that demanded Jews forsake the law of Moses and reject the God of their ancestors. Seven brothers and their mother died rather than forsake the law. They trusted that God who gave them life by creating them could restore them to life.

The martyrdom of innocent people led many Jews to believe in resurrection of the faithful dead, a time when God would restore them and vindicate their faith and sacrifice. Some faithful Jews believed in resurrection nearly two centuries before Jesus appeared on earth. Sunday's first reading contains speeches from four of the seven brothers as they die.

A family keeps the law.

It happened that seven brothers with their mother were arrested and tortured with whips and scourges by the king to force them to eat pork in violation of God's law. One of the brothers, speaking for the others, said, "What do you expect to achieve by questioning us? We are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors."

At the point of death the second brother said, "You accursed fiend, you are depriving us of this present life, but the ruler of the world will raise us up to live again forever. It is for God's laws that we are dying."

After him the third suffered their cruel sport. He put out his tongue at once when told to do so, and bravely held out his hands, as he spoke these noble words, "It was from Heaven that I received these; for the sake of God's laws I disdain them; from God I hope to receive them again." Even the king and his attendant marveled at the young man's courage, because he regarded his suffering as nothing.

After he had died, they tortured and maltreated the fourth brother in the same way. When he was near death, he said, "It is my choice to die at human hands with the hope of being restored to life by God; but for you, there will be no resurrection to life."

2 Maccabees 7.1-2,9-14

- What continuity do you see between God, the creator of all life, and God, who can raise the dead to eternal life?
- What would you put your life on the line to defend?
- What tests your loyalty to Christian values and practice in your interactions with others in our society?
- What comfort does belief in Jesus' resurrection give you in times of sorrow?

PRAY

Take a quiet time to surface your thoughts and concerns. Listen to a recording of the song "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" from Handel's *Messiah* or to Jessie Norman and Kathleen Battle's recording of spirituals such as "I Looked Over Jordan." Then make your petitions and respond to each with the words of Job 19.25, 27:

ALL: I know that my redeemer lives, whom I will see with my own eyes.



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