

The prophet Haggai 15b - 2.9
Psalm 98 – TIS 57
2 Thessalonians 2. 13-17
Luke 20. 27-38

They say that there are only two certainties in life: death and taxes. Unless of course you are somehow associated with a multi-national corporation – then taxes are possibly avoidable; simply ship the profits offshore. But, apart from death and taxes life is essentially peppered with great uncertainties.

In various ways each of the readings today are addressing a desire for certainty, and are addressed to people looking for it – maybe suffering with a degree of impatience or unwillingness to allow life be, and to trust God.

The prophet Haggai brings a word to a remnant of the Jewish people who have returned to Israel. Their ancestors who were dragged away into exile in Babylon 60 or 70 years before. This remnant has returned and things are not turning out as well as they had expected. There is no one alive from that time when the leadership of the country were dragged across the desert, against their will. So the imaginations of this remnant of what Israel was like - and should be like - was shaped by their parents and grandparents. The grass in Israel, on the other side, should be greener they thought. Take courage, says Haggai in his oracle, all you people of the land; work, for I am with you, ... My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

And the second letter to the church in Thessaloniki, attributed to Paul, is addressing a community who are impatient for the return of Christ – for the second coming. They are wavering; they want certainty; in their anxiety they are at risk of being susceptible to someone who declares themselves to be God. They want to know when Jesus' return will be, how it will take place. The writer encourages them to stand firm and hold fast to the traditions. *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, ... comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.* Again, people are encouraged to work and be confident that God is present with them.

And this strange, tricky question from a group from the Sadducees to Jesus – they want a bizarre kind of certainty about whose wife will the woman who married seven brothers be when they all arrive in heaven. It's a question seeking certainty. In reality, behind their tricky question, they want to be certain whether Jesus is a heretic or not, whether he agrees with their theology, or not; or maybe even they hope he will say something blasphemous – and so resolve their animosity toward him. And justify their murderous intent. Of course, it's a trick question to Jesus in these days after Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and before his crucifixion. There are lots of political and religious machinations to arrest and kill Jesus – his opponents are rounding on him.

As we know Jesus lived in a bristling, often hostile religious climate. Everyone wanted to know where the boundaries of belief were and what was considered to be acceptable religious practice. This is why Jesus upset so many; he crossed boundaries, winning the hearts and minds of the excluded and the downtrodden – teaching with authority and assuring them of the lovingkindness of God. We read of the despised Zacchaeus last week – beyond the pale for many but Jesus concludes the meeting with Zacchaeus by saying: *Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.* People were certain that Zacchaeus was not included; Jesus said, no, that's not true, he is.

You have entered a period of uncertainty in your life together. It's not clear what the future will hold; not clear when a new minister might be able to be appointed and in what form a placement might take shape. It's natural to feel anxious and uncertain in such a time and want to have it all laid out clearly. It would be dishonest of me to say God will be with you and it will be alright. We can never know. It doesn't mean that we don't discern and plan carefully in a space such as this. Times such as these often change us and our relationships with each other in ways we don't anticipate or expect. It can feel like our world is suddenly very fragile.

The divine greeting to those who are anxious is always: fear not. It's not that something dramatic is not about to happen; that they are not going to be called to some audacious task. But the greeting is: fear not. The divine spirit will be more than sufficient for what they need. The stuttering Moses at the burning bush. Isaiah of the unclean lips. The too-young Jeremiah. The unwed Mary – for whom pregnancy will be scandal and a threat to her life. Fear not!

As the conversation with the Sadducees winds up Jesus says to them that *God is not God of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.* Whether they are alive or dead. This expression is an echo for me of Paul's affirmation from the letter to the Romans: *I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

I find this affirmation of Paul's comes into play most powerfully for me as I conduct a funeral service. The person who has died is no longer physically present to us. Nevertheless, they live on in us – the light and the dark, the joy and the pain, that we have experienced in our relationship with them. They are in many senses still alive to us – certainly in spirit. This is why we weep and rage when remembering them – they are very much present. So, it is with God. Today in our Eucharistic Prayer we will use a prayer for All Saints Day – and we give thanks that, together with them, we all continue to be held within God:

How glorious is your heavenly realm
Where the multitude of your saints rejoice with Christ.

Our challenge with our notions about an after life is we find it so difficult to imagine things in other than space and time ways. We want to know when and where; how will it be. As the Sadducees did. But God inhabits a realm beyond space and beyond time. We don't measure divine time in tic-tok time. The invitation to be children of the resurrection is an invitation to imagine ourselves in the divine timelessness. Embraced and held in the eternal, from which nothing can separate us.

The challenge is that being able to come to this place of abandon to the divine enfolding doesn't come by sheer dent of will or striving, by our usual drive for certainty, of getting everything right, but is something which comes to us like the thief or the bridegroom who come in the night, which Jesus tells parables of. This being convinced, as Paul was convinced, comes in an effortless way where everything takes on a different set of priorities.

For the children of the resurrection, as Jesus calls them, have been born again to another way of imagining themselves and experiencing the divine present. God is not a God who is concerned with the rules, needing to be certain about our behaviour, our worthiness, our right belief. Rather, God seeks to enfold us in the eternal embrace that transcends all things. It is in this divine embrace that we are children of the resurrection. And so may we rest in love, rather than fear; in joy and peace and abundance that comes to us in Christ. Thanks be to God.

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