

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity  
November 10, 2019

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“Where do we go from here?” Think of people on a fall foliage trip sitting in a car on a back-country road in Vermont, pondering a fork in the road. Or you might be a fly on the wall in the board of directors’ meeting of a great multi-national corporation. After all the input, the discussion comes to the point of asking: “Where do we go from here?” The phrase is much used, but the *origin* of the phrase has nothing to do with leaf-peepers in Vermont or the business men and women focused on how to diversify product or increase market share. “Where do we go from here” originated in the problem which has been at the top of the charts over the whole course of human history. “*What happens when we die?*”

Your experience of life and mine is necessarily of *earthly* life. And it follows the strongest tendency is to think of eternal life in terms of *the only life we know*. Our language and vocabulary are earth-bound. When we talk about eternity the very words we use must be stretched to capacity to carry the load. Msgr Knox said this predicament is like trying to play a Wagner opera on a comb wrapped in tissue paper!

Our great mistake is to think of eternal life as a continuation of earthly life. It is as if after *unsuccessful* surgery and the sheet is pulled up over our corpse, we awaken to morning tea and toast and what the rest of the day brings! In the gospel incident the Sadducees had realized these difficulties of knowing anything about eternal life. They finally abandoned any belief in it at all. That sets up the gospel account we have today. '

The Sadducees tried to drive the Son of God into an untenable position. They fabricated one of those “either-or” dilemmas in an effort to force Jesus either to deny eternal life or allow a woman in Heaven to be married to all seven of her deceased husbands. (Waking up in Heaven to be married to seven deceased husbands begs the question whether we would want to survive death at all!) The whole set up is so ludicrous if it weren't so serious. The Sadducees thought they were stacking the deck against Jesus. What they didn't realize is they were dealing with the Word of God Incarnate on the matter.

In many places in the Gospels Our Lord gave us assurance Almighty God does not desire we live and die and be no more but that we live with Him forever. That is the whole motive for our creation in the first place. But to answer the Sadducees Jesus says we cannot liken earthly relationships to Heavenly ones. Our experience of human relationships is that they depend on time and place factors. A child at age seven to his parents is different than a child at age forty-seven to his parents. A husband's relationship to his wife five years into marriage is different than his relationship to her after fifty years. And so on. But life is necessarily very different when neither time or place are part of the equation. That is what Our Lord means by saying there is no marriage, and no death, in Heaven, there is no *birth* either, for that matter.

Up to a point the Sadducees were right. Then they got cynical and silly about it, it *is* hard to understand Heaven. That is to be expected. Living as we do in matter and time we are, after all, only *embryonic citizens* of Heaven. As St Paul put it "We see through a glass darkly." We cannot know our way around the heavenly realm; much less are we in a position to make it what we want! It is God's world, *perfectly*, as earth is not, and only His will can prevail there. Rather than project our life onto Heaven, it is far more profitable for us to ask if we will want to be there where the world is perfectly His.

A day must come when we will stand at the casket of a loved one, looking down upon a love which is now unresponsive to our call and touch, Death presents such a seemingly impenetrable barrier to us. But death is no unsurmountable problem for Almighty God. And because God is love, He will preserve all that is pure and lovely and true in human love, *and He will do it in His Own way*. In Heaven we will be near God. It follows we will be near those we love. Jesus assured us of this when He told us: "Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living: for *all* live unto Him."