

We began Mass today by entrusting to God’s care the members of our parish family who have died since last November’s celebration of the feasts of All Saints/All Souls. During this month we also commend to God’s mercy all our beloved dead, photographs of many of whom are displayed in the narthex as well as the names listed on the prayer cards in the basket at the baptismal font all of whom we will especially remember throughout this season of “All Souls.”

As we celebrate this season we are brought face-to-face with the mystery of death and eternal life.

Belief in a personal existence after death entered rather late into Jewish belief, only about two hundred years before the time of Jesus. Even then it was not universally accepted as evidenced in the silly riddle posed by the Sadducees (who did not believe in it) to Jesus in today’s gospel. The Sadducees and their followers believed one lived on after death through one’s male descendants who kept the family name going, thus, in the gospel story, the need for the woman to marry the seven brothers. The Pharisees and their followers on the other hand, believed in a personal existence after death through resurrection in a transformed human body, though what such a body was like was never specified.

In his answer to the Sadducees Jesus does not give us a definitive theology or picture of either bodily resurrection or the state of existence after death, what we term “heaven.” Jesus does assure us that this existence will be one in which we will not lose our uniqueness as persons since “God is a God of the living, not the dead.” Though like angels who are personal beings with free will, upon death, unlike them we will not become disembodied spirits. No, our enfleshed human nature is central to who we are, it, too, is destined to live forever though transformed in a perfected state no longer subject to sickness, death and decay.

In redeeming us, Jesus redeemed the whole of our existence, body and soul, not just the soul. In the Creed each week we profess our belief in the “resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” Here we look to Jesus himself. In their experience of him after his death the Apostles experienced and recognized Jesus in his body, a body transformed in a way that physical barriers such as locked doors or time and space no longer could hold him bound, but a body nonetheless, a body that bore the wounds of his suffering and death, a body that sat at table with them eating and drinking with them, a body that spoke words to them one to which they clearly recognized and responded. The great Early Church Father, St. Athanasius stated that “what was not assumed is not redeemed.” In Jesus, God assumed the whole of our life, and so it is in the same wholeness that like the humanity of Jesus we will be transfigured and rise to eternal life.

Today’s first reading of the story of the martyrdom of the seven Maccabee brothers and their mother teaches us that eternal life with and in God is not something that just happens after we die. Life is a continuum. The story reminds us that the way we live now is the way we will always live. How we live is the promise of our destiny. Heaven, or hell, in the end is simply God’s confirmation in justice of the choices we have made with the gift of life and divine grace given us here and now. An enclosed, egocentric, untrue, uncaring, unloving life is a hellish way to live in this world let alone eternally. On the other hand, daily choices of love, compassion, forgiveness, and justice in our dealings with one another and faithfulness to God is a full life now and eternally. Thus the Maccabee brothers and their mother, even in the face of torture and death, chose to profess such faith in God, a relationship incapable of being destroyed by any earthly power.

All of this is best summed up in these words from the first Preface of the Mass of the Dead, “Lord, for your faithful people, life is changed, not ended. When our bodies lie in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.” We make our own the words of today’s Responsorial Psalm refrain: “Lord, when your glory appears, my joy will be full.”