***Homily - Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C***

The Readings this Sunday focus on life after death. The First Reading from the Second Book of Maccabees, (Mac 7:1-2, 9-14), narrated the persecution of the Jews during the Seleucid, (Syria), occupation, (during this time, the Greek culture was in vogue).

Antiochus IV Epiphanes conquered Israel in 167 BC and decreed a mandatory Hellenization of the Jews, that is, the Jews would now have to follow the Greek culture. He outlawed circumcision which was a cultural identity for a male Jew. The practise of circumcision was based on the covenant God made with patriarch Abraham, (Gen 17). He also forbade the Jews from gathering for prayer; observing the Sabbath; and following their dietary laws. The nucleus of Jewish dietary laws can be found in the book of Leviticus chapter 11. Antiochus IV enthroned the Greek god Zeus, on the altar of sacrifice in Jerusalem, and ordered the Jews to worship it. The Jews resisted, and this resistance eventually gave rise to a guerrilla warfare known as Maccabean revolt led by Judas Hasmon, alias Maccabeus, (Hammer).

In the First Reading, a family of seven sons was arrested with their mother by Antiochus IV Epiphanes’ surrogates and forced to eat pork. One may wonder, what was the hue and cry about eating pork, which is a delicacy in Australia, Philippines, and many Pacific Islands. According to the Jewish tradition, among terrestrial animals, they were permitted to eat “any animal that has a cloven hoof, divided into two parts, and that is a ruminant”, that is, chews the cud, (Lev 11:1-3). For the Jews the observance of the dietary code was also a religious obligation. Pig, though it has a cloven hoof divided into two parts, does not chew the cud. The arrested siblings preferred death rather than following the laws of the occupying force which led to idolatry. The fourth son captured their belief in life after death when he said to the executioners before his death, “ 'Ours is the better choice, to meet death at men's hands, yet relying on God's promise that we shall be raised up by him; whereas for you there can be no resurrection, no new life.'”

In the Gospel, the Sadducees who do not believe in life after death questioned Jesus about the belief in the resurrection. They were the ancestors of the modern-day atheist. They held only to the written Law, (Torah), unlike the Pharisees who also held on to unwritten traditions. Hence, for the Sadducees, the inspired Scripture was the Torah – the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Since these books were not explicit on life after death, they refused to commit to a belief in eternal life, neither did they believe in spirits and angels.

God’s self-revelation to humankind was gradual, starting from His call of Abraham our ancestor in faith to the revelation of Himself to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, and finally through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of His Only Begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly, the belief in life after death had a progression as God’s revelation became clearer. Initially, the Israelites believed that when someone dies, they continue to live in some form, that is, the person’s soul perdures death. At death, the physical body disintegrates and returns to dust, (Gen 3:19), whereas their spiritual elements descend to Sheol – hollow or empty, where they cannot praise the Lord, (Psalm 115:17). Again, we read from prophet Isaiah that, “Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness”, (Is 38:18).

As the human understanding of life after death illumined by divine revelation continued to grow, it reached its crescendo in the Book of Wisdom where it stated that the souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God and no torment can ever touch them because they are living in peace with God, (Wis 3:1-8).

In Jesus’ dialogue with the Sadducees, he quoted from the Book of Exodus, which is one the books that the Sadducees accepted, as inspired to demonstrate to them, that there was life after death. He used the burning bush scene in which God referred to Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to drive home the point that the patriarchs were still living in God’s presence; for if they had been annihilated, God would not have introduced Himself as their God. Jesus also explained that the children of the resurrection do not marry because they were like the angels – spiritual.

Resurrection of the dead must not be confused with resuscitation. The latter is the raising of a dead person to continue his earthly existence. The person resuscitated would later die again. However, resurrection is an entry into a final and definitive mode of being. According to St Paul, “the thing that is sown, (that is, the buried corpse), is perishable but what is raised is imperishable; the thing that is sown is contemptible but what is raised is glorious; the thing that is sown is weak but what is raised is powerful; when it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the spirit”, (1 Cor 15:42-44).

Christ died and rose from the dead and his resurrection is the central message, (Kerygma), of the Christian faith. Through our baptism, we are grafted into Christ and we believe that when our earthly dwelling comes to an end that we shall have eternal life in him because he said that he had gone to prepare a place for us! (Jn 14:1-4).

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