**6th November 2022**

**Call to worship**

God of life and death,
we bring to you our hearts and minds,
our questions and our fears,
our understanding and our uncertainty,
those we love and those who are in trouble,
knowing that with you all are safe,
as we are,
in life, in death and beyond.
**Amen.**

**Hymn For all the saints**

**A prayer of adoration**

God of all,
we thank you for Scripture and those around us who remind us
that you are greater than our greatest fears,
that you are the giver of life
and do not let us go, even in death,
but draw us into the resurrection life of your kingdom,
which, now, we only glimpse – but one day will see clearly.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

God of life and wisdom,
forgive us when we avoid asking questions that
will help us grow,
when we settle for answers that are comfortable
not challenging,
when we do not trust you with our lives and our deaths
but allow fear to fester and uncertainty to undermine our faith.
Bless us, we pray, with confidence and courage,
and the ability to live with mystery
as we follow in the steps of Jesus, his disciples and all the saints.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Living God,
you understand our fear of death and forgive us.
You understand how hard it is to let go of life and support us.
You understand when we allow our world to cloud our vision
of your kingdom.
You understand, you forgive, and one day you will call
us home.
**Amen.**

**Lord’s Prayer**

**An opportunity to offer our difficult questions to God.**

***You will need: sticky notes; pens/pencils.***

* **Display or read out the saying, ‘The only foolish question is the one that isn’t asked’. Ask everyone if they have questions about the Christian faith that they have never asked – perhaps because they would be embarrassed to ask, or disturbed by the answer. Invite them to write these questions on a sticky note.**
* **Give thanks to God for welcoming us with all our questions, and pray for guidance and open hearts and minds in seeking the answers.**

**SONG Go Gently (John Cook song)**

**Reading: Luke 20.27-38**

**Sermon**

Are you someone who is willing to ask a question if you don’t understand something? Or would you rather keep quiet than admit ignorance? Sometimes we don’t ask questions because we are afraid that the answer may be bad for us, or for what we think we know or believe. Faith can sometimes feel as though it has to be protected from various dangers or challenges. In this week’s Gospel, the Sadducees concern for themselves requires them to elicit a demonstration of the foolishness of their (apparent) opponents.

Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) is a regular Wednesday lunchtime feature of UK parliamentary life. It’s a right circus and a bit of pantomime. We might wonder if the questions are ‘genuine’ and, even more so, the ‘answers’, which seldom seem to answer the question posed. More often than not it is about looking good on the TV and point scoring. Phrasing your question or answer in such a way as to cause embarrassment on the opposite party.

There is a story about a professor who went to see a wise person. When he arrived, he was offered tea. But when the tea was poured, the wise person kept on pouring even though the cup was full and overflowing. The professor said, ‘Stop, can’t you see it’s already full?’ to which the wise person said, ‘Like this cup, you are so full of your own knowledge that nothing else can get into your mind.’

In our bible passage today some Sadducees ask Jesus about belief in the resurrection of the dead, framed around a hypothetical situation involving widows and remarriage. Their intention is to catch him out and challenge his authority. Like the professor in the story of the tea cup they have not wanted to hear a different answer from Jesus

Jesus’ response is that the important thing about resurrection is that God is God of the living, not the dead.

The Sadducees seem to come to Jesus with an important question, but their intention – and even the question itself – is ill conceived. This leads us to consider more genuine and appropriate forms of asking questions, and the vital role they play in an open exploration of faith.

What does it mean to admit that we don’t know everything?

The Sadducees’ questions don’t seem genuine. And Jesus’ answer? What kind of questions do we find most helpful in exploring our faith?

The other week myself and the Methodist minister Phil Summers held an open event at a local café. We invited people to come and ask us questions and offer their opinions and join in a dialogue on faith and life issues. WE had about eighteen people of all ages there. There were good open honest discussions. These were some of the questions we were asked:

How can you reconcile the history of the church with its stated aims?

If God is such a loving God why is there so much killing war, rape, and promiscuity in the Old Testament?

Will there be a Second Coming?

Why is evangelism so hard today? Was it always this difficult? Does a dog collar help?

What do you think the future of the church is?

As ministers do you ever have days of real doubt? Do you question your own faith? For example, ‘Am I just imagining all this? Do I just ‘want’; to believe it? Is it possible I’m just encouraging people to follow an illusion?

If everything Jesus said and did and stood for is true, life should be really exciting shouldn’t it? Do you think Christianity is exciting?

Do you recognize that the figureheads are male dominated? Do you see room for modernization? Can you tell us about an experience you personally had with Jesus or the holy Spirit that left you convinced that he is real?

I’m sure you’ll agree there were some good questions. When I look back on the evening, I think about all the things I wish Id said! Is not that the way. But questioning makes you think through issues and rehearse what you would say. If those questions are your questions then do ask me. I will try and give you an honest answer.

Jesus said that to enter the kingdom of heaven, people had to become like little children (Matthew 18.3). Adults often misunderstand what this means because they have a mistaken idea of what little children are like.

For example, adults will often say, ‘Yes, we ought to be like children when it comes to our faith – that is, we should just accept things without question.’ Anyone who has or deals with young children is likely to raise an eyebrow. In general, the very last thing children do is accept without question! Once a small child has learned the word ‘No’ and had fun using it, the next word they seem to learn is ‘Why?’ And they are relentless in using that. Everything an adult says seems to provoke another ‘But why?’ Every answer leads to another, until the adult runs out of information or patience and, in desperation, resorts to, ‘Oh, just because!’

Adults faced with this barrage might be tempted to think the child is being awkward, naughty, playing games with them. And sometimes that may be at least partly true – after all, children are playful. But mostly, that endless questioning is because the child is genuinely engaged with life, fascinated by it, passionate about wanting to understand. And isn’t it passionate engagement with the world that has led to all the discoveries humanity has every made about the cosmos and ourselves? And these discoveries, when properly used, have enabled us to do so much good – and, for people of faith, have magnified the wonder of our creator beyond calculation. Science, like religion, requires people who are childlike in their insatiable curiosity and craving to question.

If Christian adults sometimes mistake what it means to be childlike, they also often make the mistake of thinking the worlds of science and religion are complete opposites, assuming that science is all about definite answers while religion is about unquestioning faith. Professor John Polkinghorne (1930-2021), a mathematical physicist and Anglican priest and writer, has some interesting observations to make about this (*Science and Christian Belief: Theological reflections of a bottom-up thinker* by John Polkinghorne, 1994. London: SPCK). He likens the ‘models’ scientists use to explain their observations to Christian Creeds. Scientists create their models – their ‘theories of everything’ – to make the best sense they can of the things they have observed. But sometimes those models contain elements that are only partially understood, or not understood at all – but the models are used because they seem to work. Similarly, Professor Polkinghorne suggests, Creeds seem to make sense of what we have observed of humanity, nature, and our experiences of the divine (not least, the experience of our distant forbears as recorded in Scripture), but there is much that is only partially understood, or beyond our understanding. What keeps science alive and growing is the constant drive to ask more questions, and when the models no longer make sense of the data, to adapt them. Perhaps the challenge for Christian faith is to do likewise – to be childlike in its unrelenting use of the word ‘why?’

In this week’s reading the Sadducees ask a question about resurrection. But it is evident that they’re not really open to hearing what is said in response. They are out to make a point, taking an awkward example and pushing it to the point of absurdity. They ask, what happens if a widow marries all six of her first husband’s brothers (see Deuteronomy 25.5-10; Ruth 4.1-12). But there is more at stake here than simply the continuation of the family. Fundamentally, the question is about the reality of resurrection for God’s people – something that was a matter of dispute between the Sadducees and other branches of Judaism at the time. But Jesus, in effect, responds to Job’s question: ‘If mortals die, will they live again?’ (Job 14.14). Resurrection is not just about the post-death future, it’s also a question for the present. It asks the listener to put themselves and their self-concerns aside, and to trust in God – that will result in new life. Trusting ourselves to God’s lordship means not getting bogged down in our own narrower concerns and expectations. After all, is anything beyond God’s reach and concern?

This time of year, autumn, the leaves turn brown and yellow and start to drop. It is hugely evocative of the cycle of life and death, the preparation for winter and the dark days ahead. November the 1st was marked as All Saints day in the church’s year and November 2nd was all souls day – a time to remember the dead, those who have gone before us. Because of the horrors of the first World war and the armistice being signed on November 11th we also have remembrance Sunday as well as Armistice Day – a day to remember those who have lost their lives in the service of their country. It is a deeply moving and evocative time and a time which is latent with often unanswered questions.

I know for years dealing with people who are bereaved those questions still nag them: Is there life after death? Will we meet again? Is there a God? Is God going to judge them? Will they get to heaven?

Then more emotional responses to do with thinking about the deceased. Why did you leave me? Was it my fault? Did I do enough? I wish I could have said this to you…? Alongside of course probably lots of fond memories, happy times, times of laughter and times of joy.

Jesus in his reply to the Sadducees says this:

The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. **35**But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, **36**and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. **37**But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=luke+20&version=NIV#fen-NIV-25817b)] **38**He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

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My father died on Halloween, October 31st, 1995. Four months earlier I had just been ordained as a minister. My dad was too ill to attend the ordination but we did manage to get him to see the church later. All these years I have lived with some of those questions. Did I do enough? I wish I could have said this….’ There are many questions I wish I could have asked him. He took a lot of mysteries to the grave with him. He never spoke too much about himself and I never felt in a position to ask him too many questions about his life . I wish I had.

He had faith but it was always a bit private and never spoke with confidence about his beliefs.

Yet he left me a great gift on his death bed which has enabled me to face all sorts of distressing situations in my ministry and sustained me during seemingly hopeless scenarios.

Pneumonia got him in the end and it was hard to see him struggling for breath and then hearing that death rattle in his chest.

The night before I had been praying and I was asking the Lord, please look after him, please don’t let him suffer. And in my prayers I felt as if God was saying ‘He’s safe in my hands’.

Well we took turns my mother, my brother and I to sit by his bed as he died and I have to admit I didn’t feel my prayers were being answered. This wasn’t a peaceful death. It was agonising. Then my dad grabbed my hand and between gasps just said ‘Safe in God’s hands’.

Those exact words. I hadn’t told him about my prayer the previous evening. He didn’t know those were the words I heard. Yet he said them. And he wasn’t the sort to use religious language. Safe in God’s hands.

Call it a coincidence if you want to be a hard sceptic. But I know the room was transformed in that moment.

I’m not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all are alive in me.”

The questions remain, but underneath are the everlasting arms.

[Minnie Louise Haskins’ ‘The Gate of the Year’](https://www.poeticexpressions.co.uk/poems/the-gate-of-the-year/). was read to the people of the British Empire (as it then was) by King George VI during his Christmas broadcast of 1939. This was the early months of the Second World War, and it inspired many people at the time in the face of the uncertainties that lay ahead (perhaps some in the congregation can share memories of that time). What was going to happen? For how long? What would it be like? So much was unknown, so many questions unanswerable. But people had to ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ as the posters proclaimed; and for many that was truly a case of holding God’s hand. Are there situations like that today? Situations where we don’t know what is going to happen next, but we have to carry on – in faith? Perhaps the question the Sadducees and Jesus were wrestling with – after death, what next? – is one of them.

**And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:**

**“Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown!”**

**And he replied:**

**“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.**

**That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”**

**HYMN: In heavenly love abiding**



**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, we thank you that you are the God of the living and that we are made alive in you. We thank you that you are a God who longs to listen to his people. Help us not to be ashamed to come to you with not just our words of love and praise but also with our doubts and fears, knowing that your love for us will never change. Give us the confidence to ask life’s hard questions and give us the faith to keep following you no matter what the answers are.

Lord, we bring our questions to you:
**give us the courage to be part of the answer.**

Lord, when there’s so much suffering in the world it’s hard to know which questions and petitions to bring to you first. We bring to you the continent of Africa, so much of which is now on the brink of starvation. We cry out to you to bring relief to the people who have lost so much due to climate change. We pray that the richer nations will see the news reports and be quick to respond. We continue to remember those suffering from the flooding in Pakistan, cyclones in Central America and the war-torn lands of the earth including Yemen, Syria and Ukraine. We remember those who have died in the crush in South Korea and the bridge collapse in India. When we see so much suffering, we can’t help but ask, ‘Why?’ Teach us, help us, enable us to be the answers to the questions, doing all we can to uplift and support those in direst need. Give our government the courage to increase its overseas aid budget even when there is great need at home.

Lord, we bring our questions to you:
**give us the courage to be part of the answer.**

Heavenly Father, we pray for our nation. With all the turmoil of the last few weeks, please help our government to have a time of stability so that the needs of the people can be addressed.

We pray for all those struggling with the cost of living.

We pray that those of us who have wealth may be quick to share it so that our food banks and warm places are resourced with everything they need.

We pray for our health service under extreme pressure.

We pray for those workers who are conflicted about whether or not to take strike action.

We pray for the migrants risking their lives in small boats and being housed in cramped conditions when they arrive.

Lord, we don’t have the answers to all these needs. We often feel so helpless. Give your Church the strength to rise up and respond.

Lord, we bring our questions to you:
**give us the courage to be part of the answer.**

Lord, we pray for all children, young people and students that their schools, colleges and universities may be places where questioning is welcomed and they are encouraged to be curious about the world in which they are growing up. We pray that they will find wisdom as well as knowledge. We pray for all those working in fields of science, development and technology that the questions they ask will bring new treatments for diseases; new ways of living well without spoiling the earth’s resources; new ways of working in harmony with the beautiful world you have created.

Lord, we bring our questions to you:
**give us the courage to be part of the answer.**

Creator God, we lift up the COP27 conference to you and all those attending. We pray that they will have the wisdom to work towards answering some of the hard questions of climate justice. Give the world leaders the courage to act decisively and commit to saving this beautiful planet. Help them to see beyond the now and into the future of your world. Help us to be responsible citizens in the way that we care for our small part of the earth.

Lord, we bring our questions to you:
**give us the courage to be part of the answer.**

We bring to you, Lord, our questions about those we love who are ill or who have recently died. We know that you wept when your friend died but then you brought him back to life. And we know that you healed many people. But we also know that you do not always heal in this life. Lord, we admit to finding this hard to understand and, at times, hard to cope with. We bring to you, in the stillness, all those on our hearts who are struggling right now. Be close to them, Lord. Let them know your comfort. And bring relief to those in pain, we ask.

Lord, we bring our questions to you:
**give us the courage to be part of the answer.**

Father, go before us into the week ahead, we pray. Enable us to ask the right questions and to listen carefully for the answers. Then lead us on to be your hands and feet and eyes and ears to everyone we work or live with. And fill us with your strength and comfort and faithfulness to follow wherever you lead.

**Lead us forward, lead us onward, lead us closer to you.
We ask all these questions and prayers
in the knowledge that we are heard and loved.
Thank you, Lord. Amen.**



**Hymn Love divine**

**A sending out prayer**

Heavenly Father,
send us out into the world as children full of wonder.
Give us the boldness of children in asking awkward questions,
a child’s playful delight in the mystery of things,
and a childlike trust in you –
the one who knows what we cannot.
**Amen.**