

## Homily 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C 6<sup>th</sup> November 2016

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In 1895 there was a fatal collision between two trains on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. The collision occurred when a train ran into the back of another waiting at the Brooklyn Bridge station in dense fog. In order to prevent such accidents a system had been implemented by which a signalman with a red lantern was stationed along the track to warn following trains that there was a stationary train in front of them. It would appear the authorities were looking for a quick outcome as a court of inquiry was convened immediately after the accident. All the staff involved was warned they must answer all questions truthfully, they were only to answer the questions put to them and under no circumstances were they to offer their own opinions of what might have happened or offer additional information. The signalman was asked: Did you have a red lantern, as required by your instructions? Yes was the answer. Did you place the lantern on the signal pole once the first train passed? Yes was the answer. Did the second train stop at the red lantern? No was the answer. No further questions were asked of the signalman. The driver who had been killed was blamed for the accident. For some time after the accident the

signalman's work mates noticed he was not his normal jolly self. Finally a fellow worker said to the signalman: The accident was not your fault; the inquiry found you did your job correctly, you displayed the red lantern. Unable to contain himself any longer the signalman cried: But they did not ask me if the lantern was lit. They had asked the signalman the wrong question.

In today's Gospel the Sadducees' prejudice and ego lead them to ask the wrong question. Prejudice, because they believed only in what was written in the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, the Torah. Because the resurrection was not specifically mentioned in the Torah the Sadducees did not believe in it. The Sadducees also denied the oral Jewish tradition which was the source of much of the Old Testament teaching. They were ultraconservative and exploited their connections with the Romans to advance themselves both socially and economically. The Romans allowed the Sadducees considerable power provided they kept the general population under control. Fr Geoffrey Plant points out in his gospel commentary that in fact the Sadducees argued so strongly against an afterlife, resurrection, may have been out of fear of suicide attacks by Jews against the Romans. You see the Sadducees had convinced the

people that 'good behaviour' was rewarded in this life by prosperity, whereas, 'bad behaviour' resulted in punishment, sickness etc. And guess who the arbiters of good and bad behaviour were? The Sadducees. Ego, the Sadducees knew they were right and developed simplistic arguments to support their position, what we would call a sound bite. No doubt they honed their arguments on the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection and the oral tradition of the people. Because their vision was so materialistic the Sadducees could only conceive of 'Heaven' in earthly terms, they simply could not or would not accept the mystery of the unknown.

Jesus' response to their question was cutting. To put it simply Jesus undermines their argument by saying you are too bound up in the affairs of this world to accept the mystery of the next. Jesus then shows that in the Torah Moses does imply an afterlife when he talks about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So what would the right question have been? "Master, instruct us in your teaching" would probably have been a good place to start. Such a question would lead into discussion on the differences in teachings between Jesus and the Sadducees. Asking the right question always demands humility and courage because the answer may challenge

our preconceived ideas. Both the Sadducees and the Rail Authorities had preconceived ideas, both wanted to control the outcome. Our Bishop Vincent's motto is 'Go out into the deep' – this is exactly what happens when we ask the right questions. The questions to which we do not know the answer, questions that will lead us to be children of the resurrection and sons of God, questions that lead us into the unknown and not shackle us to an earthly existence.

There are many issues in our society I should question: Child abuse, Family violence, Violence against women, Religious fundamentalism in all its guises, the treatment of minorities, the treatment of aborigines the first Australians. But for me personally the difficult question is; "Is my country's current immigration policy one I could justify to Christ?" You see I'm not worried about defending my position on some talk back show or Q&A. I'm worried about standing before Christ when Christ says: "I was homeless and you rejected me." because that will be my fate. Christ, who was crucified as a common criminal by the religious and civil authorities of the day for asking the difficult questions, 'the right' questions.

You see I am haunted by a passage in The Book of Wisdom: *"for they justly suffered because of their wicked*

*acts; for they practiced a more bitter hatred of strangers. Others had refused to receive strangers when they came to them.” (Wis 19:13-14)*

I am also haunted by a poem by Martin Niemöller, a German Lutheran pastor:

“ First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—

and there was no one left to speak for me. ”

Do I have the courage to ask the right question? If not who will ask the right question for me?

*Deacon George Bryan*