Judaism In the time of Jesus embraced a number of religious groups and movements. The one we hear the most about in the Gospels is that of the Pharisees. They tended to be deeply committed and sometimes rigid people who followed not only the Mosaic Law in its written form but also the oral traditions that had grown up around it. Among other things, they believed in the resurrection of the dead, while the Sadducees, who appear in today’s reading, did not.

The question they put to Jesus is so formulated as to make faith in the resurrection seem almost absurd. Disregarding the details of their question, Jesus declares that the children of this age, that is people like ourselves, people living in the world that we know, marry and have children and create families, whereas in the life that follows upon the resurrection, that will no longer be the case.

Someone asked me not too long ago what kind of images I had of eternal life. I had to admit that I had no clear image of it. I believe that it will involve not only my soul and my body but in a sense all that I am and have been able to become in the course of my life, including whatever good I might have done.

In talking about eternal life, St Paul once said that we really have no idea of what in detail it is like. Christian faith affirms that it involves the soul and the body but exactly how that is the case is beyond anything we can think or imagine. “Eye has not seen nor ear heard,” Paul once wrote, “nor has it entered into the human heart what God has prepared for those who love him.”

In another letter, the Apostle defended faith in the resurrection against a number of believers in Corinth who were denying it. He insisted both on the bodily nature of life beyond this life and the radical transformation that our bodies will undergo as they enter it.

Appealing to the analogy of a seed, Paul says that when it comes to the dead and their burial, “what is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in honour … it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.” Beyond the radical transformation that will take place, there will be a real continuity between this life and the next. As the Mass for the dead affirms, “For your faithful, Lord, life is changed, not ended and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven.”

When a question about the next life arises in the Gospels, appeal is regularly made to images of various kinds. The most common of them is of a heavenly banquet in which all the faithful are invited to participate.

There is a sense in which the whole of life, whether it be short or long, is given to us so that we may become the kind of persons we need to be in order to enter into the presence of what, through Jesus, we have come to know as infinite goodness and love. The first letter of John puts it this way: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God and that is what we are. We are God’s children now, what we will be has not yet been revealed; … when God is revealed we will be like him for we will see him as he is.”

There is a conviction running through the Bible that the most fundamental truth about us is that we have come from God and are destined one day to return to him. The basis for believing this is the biblical vision of human life as made in God’s image and likeness. As a result, there is something in us that shares in and reflects the life of God. This was eminently true in the case of Jesus. “To see me,” he once said, “is to see the Father.”

When prophets speak of the future Day of the Lord, they tend to imagine the world, including nature itself, as being transformed. Isaiah declares that on that day “the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them.”

One of the paradoxes of human life is that as we grow older and weaker and as we approach the end of life, as we know it, we are on the threshold of entering into a new and transformed life, which will bring this life to its fulfilment. One of the last words of Jesus on the cross sums up for me the trust and hope with which I would like to approach death. “Into your hands I commend by spirit,” Jesus said. It is a prayer that we can and should make our own.

As Jesus puts it in today’s reading, God revealed himself in the burning bush as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. “He is God,” Jesus says, “not of the dead but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”