

Readings for Sunday November 10th 2019

Job 19:23-27 (NIV)

²³ “Oh, that my words were recorded,
that they were written on a scroll,
²⁴ that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,
or engraved in rock forever!
²⁵ I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
²⁶ And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
²⁷ I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!

Luke 20:27-40 (NIV)

²⁷ Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. ²⁸ “Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. ³⁰ The second ³¹ and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. ³² Finally, the woman died too. ³³ Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

³⁴ Jesus replied, “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.’ ³⁸ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” ³⁹ Some of the teachers of the law responded, “Well said, teacher!” ⁴⁰ And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Sermon: Marriage and the General Resurrection

We can ask questions for all kinds of reasons, for example: to gain knowledge or comprehension, to analyze or assess a situation, to challenge authority, to win an argument or debate, or to shame or trick an opponent, and so on. The *wording* of a question sometimes frames or shapes the following conversation or response; consider those of a journalist or a lawyer. Often the one who asks the question is in a position of power. In today's incident, the Sadducees are questioning Jesus about a mystery that they had *already* considered *and* rejected. The question they asked was *not* with the purpose of a genuine dialogue but with the hope of showing Jesus up in public as untrustworthy and unenlightened. Jesus displays his wit and insight, so silencing his questioners and establishing his own authority, even within the Temple at Jerusalem.¹

But who were these Sadducees? They were a wealthy Jewish group who were closely aligned with the aristocratic and priestly classes of Jerusalem.² Their name, which means "righteous," is linked to Zadok, the high priest at the time of David and Solomon.³ They were active for the 200 years prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. In contrast to the Pharisees, the Sadducees only adhered to the first five books of the Bible, those attributed to Moses, and rejected the authority of the later prophets and the oral tradition. The Sadducees still literally believed in an "eye for an eye," whereas in Jesus' day, the Pharisees had replaced such judgements with financial compensation. The Sadducees were, in one sense, the strict conservatives of their day. They also denied the belief in the general resurrection at the end of time, along with the existence of angels and the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul.⁴ They were like today's rationalists, who believe in the power of human reason, and like atheists who believe that when your dead, there is nothing; you simply live on in the memory of others. Since the Pharisees and other groups⁵ believed in the general resurrection, this matter was a topic of discussion with the Sadducees at that time.⁶

As I mentioned earlier, because the Sadducees were *already* convinced there was no resurrection, their question was to publicly embarrass Jesus and undermine his all-too-apparent authority.⁷ They begin by rightly quoting Moses as endorsing the practice that if a man dies leaving a wife - but no children - then

¹ See Luke 19:45-48; 20:1-8. Luke place's today's passage in that context.

² Because the Sadducees left no writings, relatively little is known about them except from references from others (like Josephus and later rabbinical writings). They were known to collaborate with Rome to maintain their power and influence.

³ See 2 Sam 8:17; 1 Kings 1 :39; 1 Chron 24:3. It is unclear as to whether they were *actually* descended from Zadok.

⁴ i.e., there was no "afterlife." They also emphasized free will and down played divine providence.

⁵ e.g., the Essenes (and likely the general populace). The first clear reference to the resurrection of the dead appears in Dan 12:2 (2nd century BC) and the Hellenistic belief in the immortality of the soul also appears in Wis 3:4; 8:13; 15:3; 4 Macc 14:5. Moreover, Daniel makes clear reference to angelic figures, namely, Gabriel and Michael (Dan 8:15-17; 9:21; 10:13-1; 12:1).

⁶ This account, also in Mark 12:18-27 and Matt 22:23-33, is fascinating as we hear Jesus' passing reference to the *nature* of the resurrection. Paul deals with resurrection in 1 Cor 15 and 1 Thess 4:13-18 (written earlier than the gospels). See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Transformed-Bodies.pdf>.

⁷ Or, more generally, stirring the pot! Asking the question only makes sense if they knew Jesus believed in the resurrection.

the man's brother must marry the widow and together have children to continue the family line.⁸ We find this notion as horrific abuse today and made worse when we remember that wives were legally considered more like property than people in those days. However, in this way, the widow's (male) *children* perpetuated her dead husband's property rights and lineage, *and* provided her with *security*. Building on this widespread, ancient practice, the Sadducees then pose a hypothetical example that is meant to show just how *foolish* a belief in the general resurrection is: "Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too – which was likely a relief!! Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"⁹

Absurd as the example is meant to be, behind it is a real and serious question, one that we still ask today. Before I met and married Mary, I was a widower. This issue is therefore personal to me and, perhaps, to you or to people you know – including remarried widows and widowers of those killed in times of war. We wonder about the nature of *relationships* when the general resurrection takes place; in other words, what is the *connection* between life in this "present age" and in the "age to come"?¹⁰ This is also reflected in Eric Clapton's moving song, *Tears in Heaven*, written not long after his 4-year old son, Conor, was tragically killed. The lyrics contain various questions: "Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven? Would you hold my hand if I saw you in heaven? Would it be the same if I saw you in heaven?" He doesn't answer his own questions but ends with a statement of confident hope: "Beyond the door, there's peace I'm sure and I know there'll be no more tears in heaven."¹¹ I share that view.

What does Jesus say in response to the Sadducees? He speaks on *their* terms by first using logical reasoning and then he quotes from Moses. He says that we must *not* think of resurrected life in the age to come¹² simply in terms of a *continuation* of this worldly life, which is precisely what the Sadducees had assumed. Life in the age to come will be quite different, because *we* will be quite different. Jesus then goes on and reminds the conservative Sadducees, using *their own* Mosaic reasoning, that marriage is for procreation - for children.¹³ Now, of course, we don't define marriage simply in those terms today! We think of marriage in terms of mutual love and partnership, which expresses itself in many ways – not simply through children, but that's beside the point in this argument. Jesus then goes on to say that in the age to come, people "can *no longer die*."¹⁴ And because of *that*, there is no need to maintain a

⁸ See Deut 25:5–10; Gen 38:6–11. (This practice was also carried out by the Assyrians and Hittites.) Prior to the notion of a general resurrection, the Israelites believed that one lived on *only* in one's descendants and in their memory (see Job 7:9).

⁹ Luke 20:29-33. Our sympathies today are (rightly) with the woman!

¹⁰ This *apocalyptic* terminology comes from Jesus' own response in Luke 20:33-34.

¹¹ See: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/ericclapton/tearsinheaven.html>.

¹² The resurrection for a Jew would happen at a future time when God would raise the dead *and* create a new world for them to live in. This hope was *not* what we usually think of when we say "life after death," and *not* a bodily state in which people simply went on existing in some form or other – the (Greek) "immortality of the soul." ["Heaven" itself is not mentioned!]

¹³ See Gen 2:24; 3:16.

¹⁴ Luke 20:36.

lineage by having children and therefore *no need* of marriage! He goes on to say that people will be *like* the angels, which does *not* mean we *become* angels, as you often hear in popular folk religion today. We are like angels in that we will live close to God and have a different kind of body; we will live forever and therefore procreation will be irrelevant,¹⁵ but, *unlike* angels, we will be called “children of the resurrection.”

Having given an argument from logic, Jesus then quotes from those Scriptures that were deemed authoritative by the Sadducees. He reminds them that at the burning bush, God told Moses that he was the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”¹⁶ His point was that God’s words to Moses were in the *present* tense, indicating that the Sadducees’ own view - that “when you are dead there’s nothing” - was incoherent. Jesus then says, “God is *not* the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”¹⁷ Consequently, Christ’s dual response to the Sadducees’ trick question makes their silly quandary disappear and they are silenced.¹⁸ But we still have our questions!

As you can see, this is a tricky - yet fascinating – passage for Remembrance Day! Let me share two further observations. First, to say that we will be “like the angels” is a *radical* statement that wipes out the various layers within society. It raises the lowliest, like the widow, and lowers the elite, like the aristocratic Sadducees. Those who have been dehumanized will be restored, those who have been oppressed will be set free, and those who have been treated as inferior will be raised up. Moreover, within that biblical mindset, this is good news because women will be able to give and receive love as *they* see fit and not at the whim of a man.¹⁹ This is a wonderfully reassuring message to all who are oppressed, perhaps especially those whose experience of marriage has been abusive. I acknowledge that this passage may seem disturbing or disappointing for those whose experience of marriage is largely one of joy and happiness. However, it is dangerous to make firm claims about the nature of *relationships* in the age to come from this brief response to the Sadducees’ question. But what is clear is that Jesus rejects the Sadducees’ assumption that the age to come is simply a *continuation* of this present age. We need, then, to open our minds to exciting, unimaginable possibilities!²⁰ Pastorally, this gives freedom for widows and widowers to remarry without any sense of guilt. Marriage is “to *death* do us part” – it is *not* for eternity, but for “this age.”

¹⁵ See also 1 Enoch 15:3–7, written around the same time as Daniel. Note the reference to “sons of God” in 20:36b is an allusion to Gen 6:2-4. Jesus is not rejecting marriage; he is saying that inheritance rights are irrelevant in the age to come.

¹⁶ Luke 20:37, Exod 3:6, 15, 16.

¹⁷ Luke 20:38. This also implies that the *identity* of “Abraham” (etc.) is preserved; “Abraham” is still uniquely “Abraham.”

¹⁸ Luke 20:40.

¹⁹ In the 1st century Jewish context, a woman’s status and survival in the world depended on being attached to a man. Even in asking “to whom will she *belong*” (see Luke 20:33), ownership is implied.

²⁰ In 1 Cor 2:9 Paul (apparently adapting Isa 64:4; 52:15) writes: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” the things God has prepared for those who love him.” While this is often interpreted in terms of the “age to come,” this is *not* how Paul uses that text here! But this does not mean that it is inappropriate to also apply it to “the age to come.” See also 1 Cor 13:12.

Second, notice how “being like the angels” is far from the notion of an immortal soul, a view that has intruded itself into Christian thought through Greek influence. The idea of an immortal soul is based on a human desire that *denies* death because we *want* something of *ourselves* to live on forever. In contrast, the general resurrection at the end of time is based on a doctrine that maintains that even though we die, *God* himself will give life to the dead once again - to those who were faithful!²¹ That puts the emphasis and initiative back on to our Creator God, where it needs to be, rather than in some mysterious enduring properties of the “soul.”²² We must never underestimate the creative power of God, nor his love for us and all of his creation.²³ So what then happens to us when we die? I suggest the simplest thing to say is that all those who are dead are preserved in the mind of God, awaiting the general resurrection. This view might be surprising to some; however, the biblical perspective is that life itself comes from *God* and there is nothing within a human being that is inherently immortal. Where there is life beyond death, it is God’s gift to those who have accepted and embrace his love, and it is therefore only by God’s grace and power we become the “children of the resurrection.” I believe we can take great comfort from this perspective. It gives us hope to live and hope when we face death - and there is nothing sadder than to go to a funeral were people are grieving and have no hope. However, this brief episode does not answer our many questions concerning the nature of the resurrection and the new creation. But we are invited to trust in God with all our questions, a God who - as Luke later tells us - *raised Jesus from the dead* with a new resurrection body as a foretaste of things to come.²⁴

In conclusion, Jesus describes reality as having two ages or realms: the present age and the age to come.²⁵ The advent of the God’s realm in the life of Jesus Christ means that God is living and active in this world now *and* will also bring the world to the fulfilment that God intends for it. As Christians we therefore live *by faith* in these two worlds simultaneously, or with one foot in each age. Christ’s birth revealed “God with us” - Emmanuel²⁶ - and by his Spirit, God is still present with us. And Christ’s resurrection reveals the age to come is assuredly on its way.²⁷ Consequently, we are well-grounded and free to live *in* this world, with all its complex issues, with hope and patience and courage. Amen. Let us pray.

²¹ Notice Jesus doesn’t say *who* is going to be resurrected and who is not.

²² The soul is usually taken to be non-physical whereas resurrection implies an incorruptible (see 1 Cor 15) body of some sort.

²³ See Mark 12:24 and Matt 22:29.

²⁴ See Luke 24 and his 2nd volume, the Book of Acts.

²⁵ This is *apocalyptic* terminology, building on popular, post-exilic (apocalyptic) literature - such as Daniel.

²⁶ See Matt 1:23.

²⁷ Paul has this confidence in 1 Cor 15:55 - “Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?” (citing Hosea 13:4). In that chapter, Paul rejoices with gratitude for the victory of God in Jesus Christ over the powers of death.