

3rd Sunday before Advent (Proper27), Year C

Luke 20.27-38

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St Luke's, Chelsea

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I can't help but feel for the woman in today's gospel story. It's a heartbreaking tale that is laid out by Jesus's questioners. A woman's husband dies – a great sadness in itself. And so, following the Levitical laws to the letter, laws designed to save widows from destitution, the husband's brother marries her. But then he dies. So a third brother marries her. And so on – until the poor woman has been bereaved six times, and is, we may imagine, feeling pretty shaky about the long-term prospects for her marriage to the seventh brother. There's a good reason why Hollywood never made a musical comedy called *One Bride for Seven Brothers* – this would hardly make for an amusing night out, and it's hard to envisage what show-stopping numbers might be.

The story itself is, of course, absurd. And Jesus's questioners know that. They don't imagine this scenario is ever likely to happen. But they're offering the absurdity because they're concerned about an issue that is far from absurd. It's an issue that mattered deeply in Jesus's day. And it's a question that is surely still one of the central questions facing every individual today. That question is: what happens when we die?

The Sadducees, Jesus's questioners in this story, would give the answer: not much. Perhaps there is, as much of the Old Testament envisages, a fairly shadowy existence in a realm called Sheol. But death is, by and large, the end. And one of their criticisms of this fairly recent Jewish idea of resurrection – the idea that the entirety of our selves – our inseparable body and spirit – will in some way rise again – is that it makes a mockery of the fact that our lives involve change. Hence the question they pose to Jesus through the tragi-comic story of the multiply-married widow. Since one of the markers of this life is change, how on earth does it make sense to speak of our resurrection in some particular recognisable bodily form?

And that's a fair question, if its premise is correct. If we will be resurrected at some snapshot moment in our lives, and we may well respond that this will not represent the whole of who we are. Saint Augustine once suggested that at the resurrection we would all be the age at which Jesus began his ministry (since this must be the perfect age) – in other words, that heaven would be a place filled with thirty year olds. I'll leave it to you to decide whether you'd like to spend eternity as your thirty year old self – but it at the least hardly captures the whole of who you are, and leaves the question of what happens to those who never reach that age.

But it seems to me that Jesus's answer to the Sadducees rejects this premise, and directs us away from this kind of vision of heaven. Marriage, he responds to the Sadducees, is something for this age. It is not something that will exist in heaven. And his point is not just about marriage. Our particular jobs; property; favourite coffee shop; encyclopaedic knowledge of Premier League statistics; favourite foods: all of this is for this age. Yes, the future involves resurrection. Yes, this involves more than simply a floating spiritual existence: resurrection is in some meaningful sense the resumption of our bodily existence. But no, there are significant ways in which the new heaven and the new earth will be nothing like our current one. This question about marriage misses the point, because it assumes too great a continuity between this age and the next.

Now, I think we need to defend Jesus here against one way of reading his words, For we may well hear these words and say: what is the point of resurrected life if it does not bring us back into relationship with the things – and, more importantly, the people – who we have loved in this life? Where is the hope in these words for the grieving spouse who longs to be reunited with their lost loved one?

And if this were Jesus's point, I would have questions to ask. Heaven is in my mind too a realm in which we will again be caught up in those divinely-inspired loves we have enjoyed on this earth – and above all, reunited with family, friends and loved ones in a place where 'mourning and crying and pain will be no more' (Rev 21.4).

But I think Jesus's response to the Sadducees is intending to press a slightly different point – a point that emerges in the somewhat cryptic

words with which he ends. For at the climax of his response Jesus invites the Sadducees to recall the story from the Book of Exodus, in which Moses encountered God in a burning bush that blazed yet was not consumed. And as Moses approached the bush, God identified himself by declaring 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Ex 3.6).

The theologian Ian McFarland suggests that, with these words, Jesus is reaching the climax of his response to that core question of the Sadducees: what happens when we die.¹ For, he proposes, on hearing God's words our first impulse might be to assume that they are a historical report – like saying, 'I am the god that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipped.' But, he continues, Jesus seems to be suggesting that we should understand the words differently. After all, God is not defined by what Abraham or his descendants did. It's just the opposite: God defines who we are.

It is a Christian presupposition that the universe exists only not thanks to God as some sort of architect who made good plans 4 billion years ago and then walked away – but that every second of existence is also an act of God's ongoing creative work. In like fashion, each of us live because God names us and calls us into being. Our identity is an ongoing gift of God.

So when God describes himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he is not making a historical report. Instead, he is saying 'I am the God of these three – right now!' And that, for Jesus, indicates that death is not the end. God is a 'God not of the dead, but of the living'. And so even after our earthly death, we continue to live so long as God continues to name us as God's own.

'Now, none of this', McFarland continues:

takes anything away from the oddity of the resurrection as a doctrine of the church. For we have no conception of what it could possibly mean to go on living without experiencing life as an ongoing sequence of events. For us on earth to live is, inexorably, both to change and to be changed. Indeed, we tend to pin our hopes on this

¹ Ian McFarland, 'The Resurrection of the Dead'. University Sermon, St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, 2019. <https://www.universitychurch.ox.ac.uk/sermons/resurrection-dead>

very feature of our lives: because we are all too aware of the ways in which we have fallen short in the past, we look to the future, to the possibilities that still lie before us, as giving us the opportunity to redeem ourselves, to make up for our shortcomings and, hopefully, make something more meaningful of the very mixed bag that any of our lives is on an objective reckoning.²

But all our talk of resurrection remains, I would suggest, good news. Talk of life after death is not so much a promise that we will just get more of what we are already experiencing. It is a promise that our deepest identity lies in God. And this is an identity that acknowledges who we are from the entirety of our earthly life, whether that life lasted one day or one hundred years. It is an identity from God's eyes that our lives, the bad along with the good, are valued and affirmed by God as they are and in spite of what we accomplish or fail to accomplish in them.

We cannot know what the future holds. But the Christian hope of resurrection invites us to trust that, whatever the struggles of this life, our earthly lives are not hopeless but are upheld by God as good. In the last line of the creed the church affirms its belief in the 'life of the world to come'. And what life this may be, with God, who is 'God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all...are alive'.

² From the same McFarland sermon. The final two paragraphs also draw selected phrases from McFarland.