

Luke 20:27-38

²⁷Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰then the second ³¹and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³²Finally the woman also died. ³³In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." ³⁴Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

The Sadducees come to Jesus with a question about the resurrection. What kind of question is it? Is it a question to catch Jesus out? Sometimes the pharisees and saducees did ask those questions. A question may also be asked to try and elicit further insight or information. This is a draw you out question. From it we gain a deeper knowledge or wisdom. It is a question that invokes the person to share their thinking. We know that the sadducees did not hold a belief in the resurrection. It is suggested that during the time of the Maccabees when people were martyred for holding their religion, then they started thinking that there might be some way of them sharing in the later religion which their sacrifice had helped create. Was it possible for them to live on after their death? The sadducees answered "No" to this question. Even though they have a position, their question turns out to draw the thinking of Jesus on the question about the resurrection. So it is good to ask questions. Jesus does not reject the Sadducees for asking questions. We too have questions about the concept of resurrection. It is good to ask questions.

Often to get the interesting answer you have to ask the right questions. Take notice of the questions, not just the answer.

In this sermon, I will elcidate the biblical story of Luke 20, and link it to the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3. I am going to suggest that how we understand time in this context is important, and I will conclude with inviting you to think about resurrection as an experience that comes from the living God. This experience is not about a physical body, but an experience that moves us from death to life. Whatever you think about resurrection, Jesus is at the centre of this experience.

So the Sadducees come to Jesus with a question about the resurrection. The Sadducees had primary authority over the Temple. They recognized only the original five "books of Moses" as fully authoritative, and for this reason did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, as that is not referenced in the Pentateuch.

So they come with a very practical question. There is in the book of Deuteronomy a law about marriage. (Deut 25) That law requires that if his brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother. The Sadducees pose a hypothetical question of what happens if that brother dies, and then his next brother dies and so on up to seven times. In the resurrection, whose wife is she the husband of?

Jesus replies that those who are considered worthy of a place in the resurrected age, do not marry or are given in marriage. And he goes on to quote the burning bush story in Exodus chapter 3.

So if the belief is in the resurrection of the body, does that mean a physical body? Does that mean if I have a leg amputated, will the resurrected body include that leg or not? And will biological and sexual functions continue? Well in his answer to the Sadducees, Jesus says that the physical laws of marriage do not apply. There is a belief given to Moslem martyrs or suicide bombers, that when they get to heaven, they will be repaid with 72 virgins in a kind of celestial playboy mansion. This is a view of heaven entirely for male pleasure. Jesus does not hold this view.

In the resurrected life we do not die. What I take from this is that the resurrected life is different in kind from the earthly life. And if we take the answer from Jesus about the seven wives, Jesus states that the resurrected life is not a physical thing, it is not a resuscitation of my current physical body.

When the dead are raised, says Jesus in this account in Luke, it is like the story of the burning bush. Let me quote it from Exodus 3:1-6.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (NRSV)

The bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Now it was St Augustine who believed that at the creation, time was created. The cause and effect view says that every effect must have a cause, and we can trace back until the beginning of the universe, and then ask what happened before the initial big bang. However, if time was created, then there was no before. Time then was a product of creation. The same argument can apply to the end of creation. Time does not apply to the world of eternity. The image of the burning bush that is not consumed matches that view. In the world of physics, we are looking more at the physics of Einstein than the physics of Newton.

To spell this out as simply as I can: There is a danger to think of the resurrection on a linear time scale. We are born, we live as children, adults, perhaps parents, grandparents, and at some point we die. Then what happens? The "then what happens" is a linear question. That is Newtonian physics. Instead think of life in relation with the kinds of life we can have. If we think relatively, that is Einstein's physics, then it is possible to live the resurrected life now.

The resurrection is like the burning bush that was not consumed. We are not dealing here with factual or literal proposition; we are dealing here with poetry, and in particular, metaphor.

Where does that leave us as we try, like the Sadducees, to understand what the resurrection means? It means that the language of resurrection, and there is an argument that this includes the language of religion, is the language of poetry. We try and use images of poetry to think about things that we cannot describe any other way. Jesus saw God as the god of the living, not of the

dead. That we can affirm. But the job of the poet, talking about our conscious life from the inside, yet trying to voice the things that are eternal, must use words that stretch our imagination beyond what is not the fashion of the day.

Another way of thinking about this is to see the resurrection as an experience. It is an experience we have - we have it through participation, it moves us. For Roman Catholics, that experience is primarily found in the sacraments. For Protestants, we place primacy of that experience in the word, the sacred stories, the poetry of psalm, the music of song. But both word and sacrament are important.

There are experiences that can be extremely damaging. The current electioneering in the US is a damaging experience. Democracy needs to be lifted out of hate and slander, innuendo and half truths. These are damaging and deadly experiences. Democracy needs to come into another plane, another place, to be lifted above this morass.

Those who experience sexual violence and abuse are damaged. They need healing. War is an experience that drags us down. The ways of peace are not found in cluster bombs or incendiary devices. Money can be damaging. It can lower humanity to become a commodity, an object for selling or buying. When our society and our communities are made into battlegrounds or a marketplace, or a place that degrades our personhood, where children cannot flourish and instead go hungry or homeless - we need lifting outside these experiences. These are the ways of death not life.

The resurrection experience found in Jesus brings this new life.