

WHOSE WIFE WILL SHE BE IN THE RESURRECTION?

Luke 20: 27-40

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and 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. Now, there were seven brothers: the first married and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all 7 died childless. Finally, the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the 7 had married her'

Jesus said to them: 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage. But 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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And 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. Now God is God not of the dead, but of the living for to God all of them are alive.'

Then some of the scribes answered 'teacher, you have spoken well' For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

Sometimes, when someone asks a question, everything depends on why, and the way, it was asked.

I have found that often, a question about what happens after death, is really a question about this life. For example it might mean: does God REALLY love me even though I've done this or that, or does God REALLY love this person who died without every repenting for this horrible thing they've done, orcan it be true that life is so precious that it simply cannot be over when the body has drawn its last breath?

THOSE are discussions I love. Not because I know the answers and love telling people how much I know; I love discussions like this because I *don't* know. No one does. But how people approach the questions reveal much about who we are. And the intensity of the feelings surrounding the questions is very real, and takes us to deep places.

One thing you can count on: When someone asks what happens after death, there is something specific and very important fuelling the question.

I'll tell you about one time when I learned that the hard way:

I used to take my turn with other clergy in the town leading what were called "spirituality sessions" at the local rehab centre. Men and women at that centre were on a journey out of the hell of alcohol and drug dependency, and part of their healing was these sessions, optional but quite well attended. We talked about nearly everything at those sessions, and one day the subject of life after death came up.

One man in particular asked me what I thought. So....I said a version of what I always say, (and I have to say that in doing so I was assuming that because he was in rehab, that his agenda in asking was that he had probably done some things in his life that he was ashamed of and afraid God could not forgive....) and so I said what I usually say, which goes something like this:

- 1) No one knows for sure the details of what happens after we die
- 2) I'm going to tell you what I believe, not what I think YOU should believe
- 3) Life, we are told, is energy. Energy by definition, cannot be destroyed. It can only change forms. And so it makes more scientific sense to me that life continues, than to take the position that it does not. To me the more unbelievable position to take would be that life ends when the body dies
- 4) Whatever form that continuing life takes, it's going to be GOOD. God is in charge and I'm content to leave it in God's hands. We know that God loves us unconditionally and no matter what, and so after death we are welcomed into the love of God

So...the man said

"You mean we are all going to heaven?"

And I said yes. I know not everyone believes that, but I do. Yes.

He said – "A man in my home town raped my sister. I wanted to kill him. But I said no, just wait – God will do that for you. He's going to fry in hell for what he did. And now you're telling me that he's going to die and God is going to say "welcome home come on in?????????????"

Everything depends on why the question was asked.

Here in the scriptures, there was an agenda behind why the question was asked, but not the agenda of a grieving person wanting comfort and assurance, or even the agenda of revenge.

So why did they ask Jesus this question then?

There are two things that we need to understand before we can get any deeper into this passage. The first is exactly who the Sadducees were, and the second is about the law of levirate marriage. So bear with me for a bit while I explain – if you already know this I apologize.

- 1) Who were the Sadducees? The first thing to know is that there are no longer Sadducees in Judaism; their line was destroyed with the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. And we don't have any of their own writings – so what we know of them is from those who opposed them, or at least were not Sadducees themselves, so the information we have is hardly fair. They haven't had a chance to speak for themselves historically.

They were one of four major groups in power in Israel at that time. (the others are: the Pharisees, the Essenes and the Zealots. For our purposes today we'll just compare them with the

Pharisees. If you'd like more information on the other two groups I'd be glad to share what I know) So: the Pharisees and the Sadducees – the differences, very broadly and generally speaking are these:

The Sadducees were the priestly, economically and socially elite group. Wealthy, urban. They were focused in Jerusalem, and their concerns were primarily about the Temple there. So when it came to scripture, they focused on the priestly traditions, and the first five books of the bible.

Pharisees on the other hand, were more rural, they had the support of the common people; they emphasized the prophetic books of scripture.

Sadducees were quite at home with the Greek culture that was becoming more and more prominent in the middle east since Alexander the Great had conquered Persia in 332. The Sadducees were fine with that, perhaps seeing it as quite compatible with Judaism and the Jewish way of life.

The Pharisees were a separatist group and resisted the encroaching foreign culture.

For the Sadducees, the main religious concern was that proper sacrifice should be made at the Temple in Jerusalem. Pharisees insisted that every Jew, not just the priests in the temple, every Jew needed to keep the law in every part of life.

The most germane difference for our purposes in understanding this text is that the Sadducees: wealthy, urban, welcoming to foreign influences, ...you get the picture here. They are also conservative when it comes to religion, in this way: If it's not in the Bible, particularly in the first five books of the Bible, then it's not acceptable. They held a literal approach; a literal reading of the scriptures, with no room for interpretation and no allowing for changing situations. God said it. I believe it. That ends it.

Pharisees were those who said that the voice of God continues to speak, and speaks not only through the written words of scripture but also in the traditions of the people and in changing situations. They interpreted the Bible according to their understanding of the situation. As a result they made new laws. By Jesus' time there were 613 laws; but it's a mistake to think they made them up to make people miserable; they were trying to help. For example, in Torah it says that you can't carry anything on the Sabbath to a home that is not your own. Well, that prevented people from taking food to neighbours, and the poor, and so on, and so the Pharisees tried to make a new law that said "really the homes of certain people ARE your own home" and then they needed a series of laws explaining that and...you can see how that would go. And the Sadducees sat back and said "see? Just follow the Bible and you can't go wrong"

Another example – the Torah says "an eye for an eye" and Sadduces took it literally and actually removed the eye of someone who had removed someone else's; whereas the Pharisees' law about that was to exact the price in money for the loss of the eye.

Because of that difference – when it came to the question of the resurrection from the dead, the Sadducees, *because it doesn't say so in their Bible* – say it cannot be so.

The Pharisees who are willing to be open to new ideas, are open to the possibility that resurrection might be true.

So, when the Sadducees come to Jesus they aren't asking because they want to know; they are trying to point out how foolish is the idea of resurrection after all. If you check out chapters 19 and 20 you can see this is on in a series of challenges and conflicts...the conflict has been building. Here is a chance for them to make Jesus look stupid.

The second thing important to know as background to this is to understand the law about levirate marriage. It's in Deuteronomy 25.

When brothers reside together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. But if the man has no desire to marry his brother's widow, then his brother's widow shall go up to the elders at the gate and say 'my husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me' Then the elders of his town shall summon him and speak to him. If he persists, saying 'I have no desire to marry her' then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and declare 'this is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house'. Throughout Israel, his family shall be known as 'the house of him whose sandal was pulled off'

Of course all this was for purposes of inheritance. The first son born of that union would carry the dead brother's name but also inherit accordingly. It mattered. And in a sense, the question of resurrection WAS related, because for the Sadducees, a person lived on after death *through the generations that come after you*. And NOW you're saying they live on by actually.....living on??? NOW how are we going to divide up the properties??

So – what does any of this mean really? It's historically fascinating, at least I think so – but what is the word of God for us?

Whatever it is it is NOT about the after life.

This is the time of year when we focus on war, and peace, and remember those who gave themselves so that peace would be real in the world.

In the religious community, we have contributed more than our share to the wars in the world precisely because of the differences among us that we can see right here in this text. Within the body of Christ, within every religion there exists this tension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees as it were – those who hold to the fundamentals as they see them, and those who

interpret the tradition more broadly and inclusively. And, as you know, it can get very nasty; wars have been fought over the issues that result. And wars of all kinds are being fought as we speak – fundamentalists in all religions, ready to give everything to protect what they believe to be the truth. With one small twist that good intention becomes fanaticism that causes untold damage. Liberal thinkers in all religions, ready to be open to the spirit, to change and adapt the faith. With just one small twist that good intention becomes a wishy washy watered down loss of the very faith they proclaim.

The thing is.....Jesus challenges both groups. One saying “we have to keep the faith; we can’t forsake our heritage” and the other saying “we have to change with the times” and Jesus calls both to task and asks them to refocus on what is most important.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees weren’t bad - they were good and they were afraid, and their fear entrenched them in positions that served neither the common good, nor their own life of faith, nor the God they sought so sincerely to protect.

Jesus calls both of them, regardless of whether on any particular issue they were holding the correct view, Jesus calls them to a radical letting go of the conflict, of the attitude that sought to win, of the mindset that conceives of God as just like us only bigger.

Jesus calls all of us, to live in peace. Not a false peace that says everything is ok; not that at all. But peace that rises above sectarianism and that acknowledges the dangers as well as the blessings in our own positions and allows for the good will and the image of God within the others even as we are called to oppose them.

And when we do that; maybe even the dead will rise,