

## *LIFE IS FOR LIVING*

**SERMON at the Church of the Transfiguration (The Little Church Around the Corner), New York City, 11 November 2007**

**TEXTS: Job 19:23-27a; Psalm 17:1-8; 2 Thess. 2:13-3:5; Luke 20:27, 34-38 (BCP readings, Proper 27)**

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This passage from Luke reminded me of someone I haven't thought about for years. A girl I went to school with. Her name was Helen, she came from a devout Baptist family and during our high school days I baited her mercilessly about God and faith. Such things were not part of my life and I felt comfortably superior about that. Ridicule was my sharpest weapon and there were times, I'm ashamed to say, when I reduced her to tears. The Sadducees were treating Jesus in just the same way only Jesus handled them rather better than poor Helen. Which is hardly surprising. She and I were immature teenagers not far beyond the age when children are really cruel to each other. Jesus was—well, Jesus. A grown up, for starters, and much more mature in all kinds of ways.

Picture the scene. The temple. Crowds of people. Grim-faced scribes and chief priests who realise that Jesus' teaching casts them in a bad light but there were a lot of people around who, says Luke, *were spellbound by what they heard.*<sup>1</sup> Hauling Jesus away on a charge of disturbing the peace or blasphemy or whatever else they could trump up to silence him was just too risky. Then a group of Sadducees pushes through the crowds to confront the man. This outsider. This no-account person from no-account Nazareth in no-account Galilee. They, after all, were Sadducees—society's aristocrats, the priestly class descended from Zadok the Priest. Rich and powerful and sticklers for God's truth as they saw it. Which

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 19:48

meant Moses' teachings—the five books of the Torah—Genesis through Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers to Deuteronomy. Nothing more. They scoffed at this new-fangled idea of resurrection.<sup>2</sup> They despised those they considered peddlers of outlandish magical thinking and besides, as long as the Romans kept the peace, things went well for them. Potential troublemakers like this Jesus were bad for business.

They stand there in their rich robes, heads held high, confident and secure and looking coolly down their patrician noses at this man in his dusty robe sitting at their feet, teaching the people. Maybe one or two—young boys or teenagers perhaps—shelter insecurely behind their elders and snigger to each other. 'My dad'll show him. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge.' Poking each other in the ribs. Buoyed up by the vicarious pleasure weak characters get from being with the strong and powerful. Who did this Jesus think he was? Whatever—if he didn't know his place—which was to show them proper respect—they'd soon show him. They'd catch him out, show him up as a two-bit trader in cheap sentimental quick-fix nonsense.

Hence the Sadducees' question. It's a kind of equivalent to a modern atheist attacking believers with the 'but-you-can't-prove-God-exists' line. It's also a classic debating ploy: ridicule your opponents' position. Turn argument into a riddle. The woman and her seven husbands and what Jesus might think about them didn't actually matter to them at all. Their target wasn't a moral problem and its answer. It was Jesus.

Who just sat there. And stared at them, seeing their contempt and eager expectation of an intellectual rout. And was far too canny to be tricked by

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<sup>2</sup> Fitzmeyer, J, *The Gospel According to Luke*X-XXIV, Anchor Bible Series, Doubleday, New York , 1983, p.1299.

their ploy or humiliated by their arrogance. Mark has Jesus rebuke them<sup>3</sup> but Luke leaves that out. Jesus ignores the riddle and their bait and goes straight to the heart of the law. He launches straight into teaching the Sadducees<sup>4</sup> that God is *God not of the dead but of the living*.<sup>5</sup> This, by the way, is all Jesus has to say about life after death. It mightn't be much but it's important because it's deeply grounded in understanding of human hopes and dreams. In those times, having no heir was a very serious business. For a woman, not producing an heir—any child—was a crushing blow, a source of shame in the community and, like as not, it meant a lonely unprotected old age. For a man, being without an heir meant death was death was death. No heir to carry on one's name. The family line ended as if one had never been. Washed away like footprints on a sandy beach.

The point, Jesus says, is not rational rules and interpretations. It's God and divine understanding and compassion for God's people. The law the Sadducees mocked with their seven times seven riddle was given by God to Moses as a comfort for the people. Levirate marriage<sup>6</sup>, it was called, and it permitted marriage between the widow of a man who had died without an heir and that man's brother so that heirs might be produced for the dead man, thus securing his name within the nation.

Now Levirate marriage has gone the way of all flesh but that doesn't totally dismiss the Sadducees' sceptical perspective on resurrection. What do we really think about resurrection? While I don't want to agree with their 'stuff and nonsense' point of view, I think we have to think about

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<sup>3</sup> Mk 12:24

<sup>4</sup> Fitzmeyer, p.1299, and Craddock *et al*, Vol.9, p.388

<sup>5</sup> Luke 20:38.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 38:8. see also Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and provision if the brother who refuses to marry his dead brother's widow. His would become known as *the house of him whose sandal was pulled off* In their argument the Sadducees conflate the two texts.

where they were coming from. As far as they were concerned, resurrection just didn't make sense. It broke all the rules. And, frankly, it still does. In faith we say we believe in the resurrection at the last day but until then ...? What do we mean? When I was examined by the selection board for ordination one question struck me. If, they asked me, I could have one gift that I couldn't give away, what would it be? I wanted to be able to stand on tiptoe, I said, because then I could dance. I didn't add, because I thought they'd think me too flippant, that when I get to heaven, not one of those angels dancing on the heads of all those heavenly pins would have footwork as quick and fancy as mine.

When I get to heaven? Will my polio-damaged muscles restored and will I trip on my toes across the clouds? I don't know. Will the blind see and the lame leap? Will tragic birth defects be smoothed away? Will all the marks of life, disease and accident disappear? We speak comfortingly about meeting up with our loved ones after death, but what if one has endured a marriage blighted by domestic violence? Would the victim of such a marriage long to meet the abusive partner? What about the child who shrinks through life, fearing the moments when the bedroom door silently opens and the dark of night is deepened by the pain, hurt and confusion inflicted by a predatory abusive relative?

Sometimes, I guess, death means freedom for the living whatever it means for the dead. This is tough stuff, I know, and there just aren't any answers. Except the glow of hope from those few words Jesus said: *God not of the dead but of the living*. Beyond that we cannot know anything. Jesus rose from the dead but we don't know what happened in that cave in the cemetery garden. Only God and Jesus know that; there were no witnesses. Later at Emmaus he appeared to the disciples and *opened their*

*minds to understand the scriptures*<sup>7</sup> but nowhere are we told that Jesus explained what had happened. He focused on the living, on proclamation and the future. I imagine that, after the disciples got over their astonishment, fear and confusion, one of them—probably tempestuous Peter—ventured a timid question. ‘Come on, Jesus, what’s it like? You know. On the other side? What’s heaven like? Go on. Give us a hint.’ But he didn’t answer. We know that. No one could resist recording the answer to that question—the one that has plagued and intrigued human beings forever.

Really the one thing we have—God is *God not of the dead but of the living*—is all we need. It ought to give us enough to be going on with. Sufficient unto the day are the day’s problems. Life is for living. Imagine a conversation with God at the last day. ‘So, tell me,’ says God. ‘What did you do with your life?’ ‘Ah, dear God,’ some will reply, ‘I have waited for this moment since first I knew your name!’ ‘Ah,’ God will say. ‘But what did you do while you waited?’ Did you enjoy the world I gave you? Did you care for it and for each other? Did you have a good time? Did you deal in love and hope?’ Hopefully, we’ll be able to prattle on about the great people we knew and what a fantastic idea sunsets were—“well done, you”, we’ll say to God—even if we weren’t so sure about spiders. But, all the same, we felt we used pretty well every moment productively, we’ll add. Hopefully, we’ll be able to say something like that—because if we can’t we might have to face the answer from God: ‘I gave you life. Was my gift to you so small that you did not see its richness? Have you spent your life waiting to die?’ And we won’t be able to say, ‘can I have another chance please?’

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:27 and 44.

There really is just the one question and it need not be confused by the Sadducees and their riddles. Are we for life or for death? Jesus and God have taken care of the resurrection. What it means we cannot say. It is a mysterious gift but not for now. Now is for living. That's enough to be going on with.

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