

## Reflection for Pentecost 22 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

### Luke 20.27-38 - The Question about the Resurrection

Some people aren't what they think they are. Others aren't what they wish they were. I recently came across someone's comment: **"I was going to have cosmetic surgery - until I noticed that the doctor's office was full of portraits by Picasso."** Hmmmmmm!!

Perhaps the Sadducees fitted into that category

#### The Sadducees and their Question

We hear in our reading "Then some Sadducees, who say that people will not rise from death, came to Jesus..." (Lk. 20.27).

Who were the Sadducees? They were well-to-do, mainly priests, though not all priests were Sadducees. The early Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, describes them as being rude to one another, with not much of a following among the common people. Their religious beliefs were marked with conservatism, denying that any but the written laws of the first five biblical books were finally valid. They rejected the doctrines of the soul and the after-life, the resurrection, rewards and punishments, angels and demons.

These Sadducees came to Jesus with a question on resurrection. But they weren't looking for information. Their extreme hypothetical case was given to try to make Jesus look foolish.

To understand their question, we have to go back to Deuteronomy 25.5-10. Land and inheritance were very important. A number of provisions in the law ensured that the rich couldn't just accumulate more and more of the land. Land ownership had to stay in a family line. So, "if two brothers live on the same property and one of them dies, leaving no son, then his widow is not to be married to someone outside the family; it is the duty of the dead man's brother to marry her. The first son that they have will be considered the son of the dead man, so that his family line will continue in Israel".

So they came and asked, "Teacher, Moses wrote this law for us: 'If a man dies and leaves a wife but no children, that man's brother must marry the widow so that they can have children who will be considered the dead man's children.' Once there were seven brothers; the eldest got married and died without having children. Then the second one married the woman, and then the third. The same thing happened to all seven-they died without having children. Last of all, the woman died. Now, on the day when the dead rise to life, whose wife will she be? All seven of them had married her" (Lk 20.28-33).

It was a highly hypothetical situation by which they hoped to show the foolishness of the idea of resurrection.

#### The Resurrection Life

But these sceptics have failed to understand the nature of the resurrection life. "The men and women of this age marry, but the men and women who are worthy to rise from death and live in the age to come will not then marry. They will be like angels and cannot die. They are the children of God, because they have risen from death" (vv. 34-36).

Their view of the resurrection life (which they disbelieve) seems to be that it would be much like this present life. But, Jesus says, the present age is very different from the Age to come. In the resurrection life there will be no marriage. Further, when people are resurrected, they will be like the angels, in that they will be immortal and not subject to disease, suffering and death. It will be a very different life in which there will be no further need for procreation.

Incidentally, the Mormons have a different view of eternity - the main activity being to beget spiritual children to await earthly bodies. While not at present practising polygamy, it is still an essential doctrine and Mormon men can take to themselves other women with whom they do not

live in this life but to whom they are "sealed for eternity". This view is totally contrary to what Jesus is saying here to the Sadducees.

We read Paul talking about these matters in some detail. He says, "This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised, it will be immortal... When buried, it is a physical body; when raised, it will be a spiritual body... For when the trumpet sounds, the dead will be raised, never to die again, and we shall all be changed. For what is mortal must be changed into what is immortal; what will die must be changed into what cannot die. So when this takes place, and the mortal has been changed into the immortal, then the scripture will come true: 'Death is destroyed; victory is complete!' " (1 Cor. 15.35-58).

### **God of the Living**

Jesus goes on to say, "And Moses clearly proves that the dead are raised to life. In the passage about the burning bush he speaks of the Lord as 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is the God of the living, not of the dead, for to him all are alive" (vv. 37-38).

The Sadducees had said that the teachings of Moses didn't support the concept of a resurrection. But Jesus appeals directly to Moses. If the Lord is indeed the God of the patriarchs, the Sadducees should have known that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still alive, even though those words were spoken several hundred years after Jacob had died. So, Jesus says, "He is the God of the living, not of the dead, for to him all are alive."

For the present, this life absorbs most of our attention. But I have a feeling that heaven is going to be ever so much more exciting than anything we experience here. And here and now our lives are in continuity with all those who have gone before - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel... as well as Peter, John, Mary, Martha, Paul, Luther, Wesley... God is the God of the living. To him all these are alive.

But - did you notice? - Jesus speaks about "the men and women who are worthy to rise from death and live in the age to come" (v. 35). The Thessalonian Christians were concerned because believers had died and Jesus had not yet returned. So Paul wrote to them, "There will be the shout of command, the archangel's voice, the sound of God's trumpet, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven. Those who have died believing in Christ will rise to life first; then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4.16-17). There we have it again - "those who died believing in Christ."

Paul is emphasising that we who now believe in Christ are in continuity with believers who have died. We are alive, but, beyond the grave, they are alive too - in the presence of God.

He is God of the living. Is he your God?

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "In the past you were spiritually dead because of your disobedience and sins... But God's mercy is so abundant, and his love for us is so great, that while we were spiritually dead in our disobedience he brought us to life with Christ... For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it. God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do" (Eph. 2.1-10).

He is God of the living. Is he our God? Are we alive in Christ?

Not one of us of ourselves is "worthy to rise from death and live in the age to come." God invites us to respond to his grace, to receive his forgiveness, to be infused with spiritual life (the only lasting kind of life), to live out that life with love and integrity in the deeds we do, to live with him in the unimaginably greater and richer fulness of eternity...

He is God of the living. Is he your God? Hear his gracious invitation now! Come alive in Christ!

**Amen**