

## **Marriage and the Resurrection.**

**Luke 20: 27-38**

**November 10 2019**

We celebrated All Saints and All Souls a little over a week ago and as Julie and I entered yet more names to our list it brought home how poignant such acts of remembrance are – because they allow us to face again the harsh reality of those we love who are no longer physically with us – and somehow they combine to lend particular significance to our reflections on this Remembrance Sunday about Jesus battling the Sadducees in this little encounter.

There's *power* in remembering - not as some past dream or echo of another time, but being spiritually, socially, mentally, relationally, *re-*remembered – to be re-made and reconnected – but in a different way. In the act of coming together and

taking bread and wine, in seeking the risen presence of Jesus and committing ourselves to his life, we remember who he is so that we might know who we are -re-membered into his glorious Body, - and in doing so - each and every time we 'do this in remembrance' - we see again the real alternative that Jesus' own life and teaching spoke of becoming a reality.

There was once a famous theologian, confronted by an eager young theological student eager to offer his own thoughts about the resurrection of the dead and wanting the elder to contribute - and he refused. "I can't talk about the resurrection with anyone under the age of 30. Before 30 what do you know of honest-to-God failure, real heartbreak, mortality, solid defeat? What can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Jesus Christ is raised?"

Well Julie and I have had a lot of involvement with families who've lost loved ones way too young. so I wonder how sensible it is to set an arbitrary

age. But perhaps there is something in his larger point, even if it *was* rather pompously made: that unless we've experienced something of the world's darkness (what Richard Rohr, the Franciscan tellingly refers to as 'necessary suffering'), then the light which shines in the darkness is never going to make very much sense.

I suppose it wasn't until I'd been an emergency hospital patient with a mysterious liver disease a number of years ago - then in my early 30s - having lost 2 and a half stone in 10 days - just newly remarried - to Sue - and now seriously having to contemplate not actually making it through - the best of University Hospital's medical specialists scratching their heads and at last being honest and saying "we haven't a clue what's going on". Perhaps it was only then that I began to understand what that fear and uncertainty and awful waiting is all about (Sue certainly did as she waited to see whether I'd pull through). Experience sure puts things into perspective, doesn't it?

And then maybe *some* questions *shouldn't* be asked unless we're really hungry for an answer. The Sadducees who approached Jesus didn't *really* want one, did they? They wanted to play theological tennis with their questions to try and trap Jesus.

I used to love academic debate, but maybe it's because I'm getting older - and my brain doesn't work as quickly (just ask my son Joel!) - but it's honestly not (and has never been) the best route for people hungry for *real* answers. This isn't just a text about marriage, it's a question about the resurrection - and Jesus' answer almost seems a bit flat, like he's having an off-day?

If you think about it, other people got far better answers to this resurrection question - but then perhaps **they** were asking from a very different place in their life. Remember Martha, weeping for her brother Lazarus, what did Jesus say? "I am the resurrection and the life"; and what about Mary, weeping outside the tomb on Easter Sunday, her answer came in the form of her name

spoken from the other side of death by her risen Lord.

So:

- ask the question with tears in your eyes,
- ask it in a hospital room or a nursing home,
- ask it in those long interminable hours of the night
- ask it when all your plans have gone pear-shaped

- and we may actually hear *our own name* in the answer...

Anyway (back to today) the Sadducees came to Jesus with their “convictions” - and there’s nothing wrong with having convictions...but they *can* cause blindness - and prevent us from seeing what others are *able* to see.

(Okay so what do we know about Sadducees?) We know they were a very theologically conservative bunch. They only accepted the first five books of the bible - the Pentateuch - the ones everyone thought Moses

wrote. For them that was the extent of their bible. And since nowhere in those five books is resurrection mentioned - (well at least they didn't think so) they believed that the resurrection couldn't be real. So that was their conviction number **one**. Conviction number **two** was that, if there *is* a heaven, an eternity, a resurrection, then it would have to be exactly like *this* life. What you see is what you get - for eternity. Oh boy, great news eh?!!

And so they dream up a peculiar, marginally plausible, story about a woman and seven brothers. Because tucked away in the corner of Moses' law (in Deuteronomy 25:5-6 if you want to look it up), is the idea that if a man died childless it was up to his brothers to create children with his widow. All the evidence suggests that this law wasn't even practised in Jesus' day - but it was a nice little theological conundrum the Sadducees thought they might pose, to try and trick Jesus. Maybe they even

thought it was funny: it is a bit of a ludicrous situation - designed to show everyone who was listening that a halfway intelligent God couldn't possibly dream up something like eternal life if resulted in a mess like this.

*But it didn't strike Jesus as funny.* Death doesn't - and you could add to that, wars, conflicts, the tragic loss of life of so many young people that we were hearing about at Gowerton Comp at their Remembrance Service last Friday. Jesus's response is to turn the issue around - like we've seen him doing with so many situations. He tells them that all those social and legal relationships and arrangements which can be so good and necessary and wonderful in this life, will (thank God!!) eventually not be needed. The structures of "this age" - with all their crazy expectations will be superfluous in 'the age to come'.

In preparing for today I thought about all the funerals I've conducted over the last 15 years of ministry - ranging from babies to wonderful old

saints well over a hundred. The majority may have died from so-called "natural causes" but a good number have been horrific accidents, murders, suicides and so on. Some funerals have been attended by hundreds, one just by myself and the funeral director in a raging blizzard at a graveside. One even had very poorly disguised plain clothes policemen dotted around the congregation - that was a riot! And of course I took the funeral of my good friend Ron - perhaps one of the hardest things I've had to do.

The point, of course, is that death, like war or illness, is no respecter of age or status. You know that and I know that, but we often live as if we were blissfully ignorant of it. I'm sure that the Sadducees were convinced that they had hard-headed common-sense on their side when they rejected the "*pie in the sky when we die*" notion of eternal life. 'Better to stand tough and face the harsh truth that this is all you get'. But then that's just as much a

faith or belief position as the alternative *hopeful* one Jesus teaches.

Because opposite the very prevalent view “that this is all there is, get on with it as best you can”; that history is nothing but a row of tombstones - Jesus places another, wonderful vision. *He* says we'll be completely transformed, transfigured; that everything, our life, our relationships, even the very world itself, will be completely remade. How? And into what? Well neither Jesus nor Paul says exactly. But Jesus does say that the transfigured life will be life as it's always been intended to be - with a capital 'L'! And it starts now!

History (his-story) - and our place in it *is* going somewhere - not just round and round in circles, aimlessly. There's a beginning and an ending. There's an Alpha and an Omega.

God in Christ revealed to us - and *in* us as we trust him is not about some Great Engineer who sets the whole creation thing in motion and then

walks away, disinterested. The clear reason that we were made - however it happened and however we understand it - was to be **friends with God** - to be in relationship with him. There's lots that gets in the way of that, but that's our purpose: to be in a loving relationship with the God who made us and loves us

- **now** in this world

- and **forever** in a newly restored world of the resurrection; in a world which includes those most have viewed as long dead - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - my friends Caroline and Ron - my mum and dad - your loved ones - (even maybe Felix our cat? - now there's a thought). As Jesus said - God is not God of the dead, but of the living - to him all of them are alive. (And isn't it good to ponder *that* during this season of remembrance - and as we hear the familiar names of our War heroes read at the end of the service today)

So here's the Kingdom challenge. Are we willing to be the friend of God - to go where *God*

wants us to go? Are we willing to begin the process of being re-membered - of being transformed - starting here and now? Are we willing to let go of the brief and transitory things of this world for the sake of drawing closer to God?

They used to tell us in Sunday School that because this group of people thought *this* was all there is...that's why they were SAD - U - CEE!!

Anyway Jesus tries to blow the doors off that notion that it's just more of the same. What's 'Paradise' about that?? So whatever the resurrection is, it is utterly *other* than anything we've known. But, at its centre is the One we have always known, however dimly.

When John Owen, the great Puritan pastor and teacher lay dying, he was dictating some last letters to friends. He said to his secretary: "Write: 'I am still in the land of the living'." Then he stopped and said: "No, change that to read - "I am still in the land of those who die, but I hope soon to be in

the land of the living." Something much better was afoot...

And to be ready for the journey, for that reality - that fullness of life - Jesus tells us that all we need to do is place our trust in him (simple, but not easy) - and to live by his infilling power and grace - and by values, as we've been discovering, that are the diametric opposite of our world's.

Now I think I might possibly have recommended this before but you gotta read the Narnia books from C.S Lewis - if you haven't done before. And even if you read them as a child, have another look. (or grab the dvds - or ask me for a loan of a set of audio cds)

This is what Mr. Tumnus, the fawn, ends up saying in *The Last Battle*: *"What's more, the adventure and security never stop growing."The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets,"*

**May the God of the living - the God of Jesus Christ and the beautiful Holy Spirit - be praised now and evermore. Amen.**