

**Pentecost 25 – 9am Wesley – 6<sup>th</sup> November 2016**

**Theme:** 'Testing Jesus'

**Reading:** Luke 20:27-39 'The resurrection and marriage'

**Text:** "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living....." vs 38

**Introduction**

In today's Gospel reading from Luke we have a bizarre question from the Sadducees to Jesus. It is a trick hypothesis trying to ensnare Jesus by the answer they hope he will give. We'll look at that in a moment but firstly we need to understand a little of the religious divisions of the day into which Jesus gets drawn. Between 200 and 100 BC, the Pharisees and the Sadducees had a huge disagreement over belief in resurrection. They emerged as having different views within the Jewish faith. According to the Sadducees, there was neither a doctrine of resurrection of the dead nor belief in angels in the written Torah (that is the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures, namely Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). However the Pharisees emphasized that written Torah must be kept up to date with oral Torah, namely ongoing streams of interpretation handed down by word of mouth, co-ordinated with written Torah showing new beliefs that emerged in prophetic literature and the Psalms. Of special importance was acceptance by the Pharisees of the book of Daniel, which blended traditions of wisdom and prophecy with the new belief that emerged around 200 BC. Daniel not only features the angels Gabriel and Michael, but also presents the earliest clear biblical reference to resurrection of the dead in the context of a final judgement to everlasting life or everlasting condemnation. Jesus adopted updated apocalyptic beliefs characteristic of the Pharisees and participated in their debates about oral interpretation of written Torah. By the time the Gospel of Luke was written (80-90 AD) even though Christians and Pharisees fought they were united in God's resurrection philosophy which of course had gone further with the resurrection of Jesus. Both groups strongly opposed the Sadducees. Also the destruction of the temple in 70AD took away the power base of the Sadducees which had been in the Jerusalem Temple. Also Luke was traditionally seen as a companion of Paul, who converted from being a Jewish Pharisee to a Christian evangelist. Paul strongly believed in the resurrection and no doubt influenced, to some extent, Luke. It is with this background that we look and make more sense of the Gospel for today. Hence let's take a few minutes and delve into it.

**Middle**

Without a doubt, in the Gospel for today, Jesus was being 'set-up' by the conservative Sadducees. As mentioned earlier they rejected all scripture except the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures called the Torah. As they saw it, there did not appear to be any belief in eternal life in those five books therefore they would not entertain that possibility. The Sadducees enjoyed poking fun at those who believed in the possibility of a resurrection. On this day they had Jesus firmly in their sights. Hence they try this ridiculous hypothetical on him in the ruse of a question.

*"Teacher, Moses wrote that if a man's brother dies leaving a wife but no children, the man must marry her and rear children for his brother. Now, there were seven brothers. The first took a wife and died without children. And the second, and the third brother married her, and finally the whole seven married and died without children. After this the woman died. When resurrection happens, whose wife shall she be? All seven had her as wife."*

Silence. Can't you picture the crowd listening, some shaking their heads, and maybe some other critics starting to smile thinking to themselves; 'Get out of this trap Jesus – I can't see that happening.' Jesus bounced back at the Sadducees with a counter attack. He did it by using a passage from one of those five books they based their beliefs on. He quotes from Exodus chapter 3:

*'Even Moses showed that the dead are raised, in the passage of the burning bush, where he calls the Lord, "The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. See now he is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live in him.'* In effect Jesus says, 'Don't play funny games with me. Your own scripture condemns you.'

What is more, resurrection life is not a projection of this life; not things as they are now going on and on forever. It is something more wonderful – a complete transformation. *"The people of this world marry and are given in marriage, but those who are worthy to achieve the new age and the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. They cannot die anymore. They are like angels and children of God when they are children of resurrection."..... But as for the question as to whether the dead are in fact raised, even Moses in the passage about the burning bush, speaks to God as being at that moment "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." If God is still their God they must be still living. God is not the God of the dead but of the living: to him all live.*

This is a parabolic argument and is logical within the framework that the Sadducees gave to Jesus. We may struggle with it but in its day it was quite radical. Hence some of the Pharisees, with whom Jesus had also had arguments, begrudgingly gave him praise:

*'Teacher, you have spoken well'*

The Sadducees however, publically humiliated, moved off to finalise their plot for the death of Jesus. There is a sharp irony here also. Because the Sadducees did not believe in any possibility of life beyond death, they thought by having Jesus killed it would silence him forever and they would hear no more of him. How wrong they were.

### Three points to reflect upon

1. Jesus strongly affirmed God's gift of eternal life. This is a difficult concept for us to believe in today but don't be put off because it is difficult – it is a faith issue. Like the Pharisees and the Sadducees we still have our differences in belief here.
2. We are foolish to try and predict or picture the nature of eternal life. Too often we imagine it through the lenses of this world, rather than 'handing it over to God'. The Sadducees made themselves look ridiculous with all that stuff about one bride and seven husbands. Any picture we try to draw with pen or words, must depend on images from this mortal life. Projecting that on to eternity will make it always look pathetically ridiculous. When it comes to talking about the hereafter, the words of St Paul resonate with me:  
***"What eye has not seen nor ear heard nor mind conceived, God has in store for those who love him."***
3. Resurrection is not some natural ability we have. Resurrection is not native to us. It is a remarkable gift from the grace of God - absolutely free. This faith in eternal life is consistent with everything Jesus was, did and taught. It is consistent with what happened to him and with his amazed disciples.

Again, not an easy passage of Scripture for us today, but one that challenges us in our faith beliefs. Amen