

Till Death Do Us Part?

Luke 20:27-40

When I was younger and I watched the news I could never understand why there was so much emphasis on financial news: stocks going up, stocks going down. When it came to budget time it was worse: analysis, commentary and so on. It all seemed remote, obscure, academic and delayed the sports report. But as I got older I realised that this was not something that was remote from me, it affected my future and my well being and I really should pay attention.

Our reading today can seem a bit like how I used to view the financial news, remote, academic, obscure but as we reflect on this passage the more important it is for it is about the future, our future. As we listen in on an ancient religious debate about 1 bride for 7 brothers we will see this more than "till death do us part" but death is just part of the story: an ongoing story in which we can have a part, but not apart from God. This is a passage that is well worth considering particularly on All Saints Day as it is about the hope of all the saints that have gone before us and all who are gathered here today.

THE QUESTION

Jesus has entered Jerusalem as King and the religious leaders are coming to Jesus to test him out. In our reading today it is the turn of the Sadducees.

The Sadducees

The Sadducees were an aristocratic and politically minded group who were aligned with the Roman overlords as well as having control of the high priesthood and the Sanhedrin (The Jewish Council). They disappeared from history after the Jewish rebellion in 66-70AD and what we know about their beliefs is limited as we only know it from their opponents who are usually not the best witnesses. But we do know that they did not believe in the resurrection or the afterlife which they considered to be new fangled ideas of the Pharisees.

Levirate Marriage

So the Sadducees seek Jesus' opinion on the matter of the resurrection and the after life. They pose a question based on the Old Testament provisions of what is known as levirate marriage where a brother married his dead brother's widow to provide a child for the dead brother. The most famous example of something like this is in the book of Ruth and her marriage to Boaz, the "Pride and Prejudice" of the Old Testament.

So the Sadducees put forward an obviously academic and mildly ridiculous possibility of 7 brothers marrying the same woman in due order and then dying without having any children. In reality you have to imagine that by number 4 someone would have been saying "Guys, I really don't think this is a good idea"

The tone of the question seems to me to be dismissive. You may have had a similar experience when people find out you go to church they will ask a question, to which they don't really want to know an answer but for them it belittles your belief and makes them feel superior for having asked the question: "So if God can do anything can he create a rock that he can't pick up?"; "Why didn't astronauts find heaven?" It is a question to put they think will put you in your place.

Unfortunately for the Sadducees it is they who will be put in place as Jesus goes on to teach about his understanding of the resurrection.

JESUS ANSWER

This is really a big moment, it is one of the few moments where Jesus, the one with personal knowledge speaks about this extremely important topic. He perhaps does not say all we would want him to, and many things remain shrouded and mysterious, but we should note in some detail what he does teach, and we may find it as challenging as those First Century Sadducees did.

There is an age to come (v35)

Jesus clearly teaches that there is an age to come, he obviously does not agree with the Sadducees, there is a future for God's people beyond death.

Please notice that this age to come is not entered by simply dying as many people these days believe. To make a statement that sounds rather like a James Bond movie "Death is not enough." Dying is not the ticket into the age to come but rather something must happen after death in fact a reversal of death, the resurrection of the dead. This is not so much *life after death* as *life after resurrection*. Our final hymn "For all the saints" speaks of the saints resting from their labours then "But lo! There breaks a yet more glorious day: the saints triumphant rise in bright array."

We will rest in peace and then be raised in glory.

This is of course, and unsurprisingly what we see with Jesus' resurrection. He dies, he is buried but then he is raised. He does not simply die and go to heaven. As the first fruits and guarantee of this age to come he is raised from the dead.

It is not entered automatically (v35)

So there is an age to come entered by resurrection but notice that it is not entered automatically, it is only by those considered worthy. Now this might be quite a shock because it means its not self selecting. This new age is not for those who consider themselves worthy, but those who are considered worthy, and the one who is doing the considering is obviously God.

This backs up all that Jesus has been saying throughout Luke, entry into God's kingdom does not come through moral effort but through repentance and faith, received as a gift, accepted like a child, through recognising who Jesus is and trusting him like the thief on the cross will in a few chapters time. Being worthy is not to trust in ourselves but to trust in God and his promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is obviously considered worthy for God raised him from the dead to open up the path and if we trust in Jesus we are considered worthy, not because of our faithfulness but because of his. It our trust in Jesus that makes us saints, holy ones to God, and so Jesus triumph over death is the hope and song of all the saints, in heaven and on earth.

There is perhaps no greater thing to understand than this, we will not be considered worthy on our own standing, but only on the basis of repentance and forgiveness in Christ's name as it is put at the end of the Gospel. Please think carefully about this, this is not remote or academic, it is your future we are thinking about here.

It will be different from this age (v35-36)

So there is an age to come which is entered by resurrection from the dead not simply by dying, and will only be entered by those considered worthy, those who have trusted in God and his promises. But what will this age be like?

This is where we would have loved Jesus to have been a bit more specific. Picking up the idea of resurrection this is not simply a spiritual, disembodied existence that is on view. This is being raised from the dead into a new creation. As such it will be some ways similar to this life, but there will be differences, there will be a new order.

He does tell us that "Till death do us part" will have departed. Marriage as we know will not be part of the order, we will not be married or given in marriage. We need to notice the reason given for this. Unfortunately the English translations hide the link between v35 and v36. Literally it says not "given in marriage for they can no longer die".

Remember the reason for the marriages in the Sadducees question was to produce children about continuing on the family line, this ceases to be a problem when death is removed from the equation, when you are children of the resurrection.

This is surely not saying that there will be no relationships in this new age, we will still know our partners and friends, but our relationships will be of a different order when death is taken out of the equation.

And notice it is not "will not die", but "cannot die". This is picking up the promises of Isaiah and of the book of Revelation of a new creation where there will be no more mourning, crying or pain and death will be no more. It is in this way that we will be like the angels.

It will be glorious, but more than that we will be glorious, notice the language that is used here, like the angels, God's children and children of the resurrection.

This may sound like a vain, a foolish hope, and it would be perhaps if it were not for the resurrection of Jesus. In that event we see there is continuity, he is still Jesus who knows his friends, can be seen and touched, he eats and talks and so on, but there are also differences, most importantly he cannot die.

This is a hope that should comfort and inspire us.

Based on God's purposes for us (37-38)

Jesus ends his response by looking back to the incident with Moses and the burning bush where God calls himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the patriarchs who are long dead.

The language used, that he does not say "I was the God Abraham followed", but "I am the God of Abraham." This is present continuous tense, he is still Abraham's God even though Abraham died many years before. Jesus says this means that to God they are not dead, but rather, that to God, all are alive.

Now this is something that we need to ponder, what does Jesus mean? He cannot mean that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have already entered into the age to come for that is seen as a future event by Jesus.

In Scripture the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was known as a saving, rescuing, redeeming and promise keeping God and it seems to me best to take Jesus to mean that this saving, rescuing, redeeming and promising keeping relationship with God does not end at death. His saving purposes continue past our physical demise and they will take us to the new creation.

What this means for us.

This means a number of things. Firstly our hope is not based on a speculative idea of something eternal with in us, the immortality of the soul as it is often called, our resurrection hope is solidly based on God's eternal love, which in Jesus is seen to be death defying. There and only there is our hope.

Secondly it means that whilst many of our Christian sisters and brother are now lost to us, and I am sure that each of us can with some grief and sadness think of some, they are not lost to God. As one commentator put it "Man may lose friend by death but not God." (Caird) All the saints, all those faithful ones who have gone before us are, to quote an old cockney song, are not lost but gone before.

But this is also true for us. "Until death do us part" is not true of our relationship with God, or God's relationship with us, for whilst there is no hope apart from God, we will not be apart from him for his saving purposes for us go beyond this age.

And there is on last thing that I find really comforting here in this language of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It means that our God is the God of individuals, he is the God of Richard, the God of Shelagh and so on. We as individuals are part of God's purposes. God by his grace will save us not to be someone other than ourselves but a wonderful and glorious version of who we are. Some might think that all this talk of the age to come might make us so heavenly minded to be of no earth use, but if who we are matters then how we live now matters, if he is our God then we will want to live for him now till death does not part us but bring us together with all the saints to worship him, resting in peace to be raised in glory.