

Sermon. How many wives at the resurrection?

Reading: Matthew 22: 23-33

Introduction:

We don't tend to hear much preached about the resurrection or heaven anymore. Maybe some think it's simply a nice story we tell children to comfort them when they realise death happens as a natural part of life, or it seems a bit far fetched to still believe in a resurrection with all of our scientific knowledge today.

In this culture of silence from the church atheism has thrived. Although atheists would claim no faith or belief system, they do hold to a faith that there is no God and a belief which they hold to which may sound like this, 'live our best life now for tomorrow we die'. Humanists place a high value in humanity and live life caring for one another, but in the end their belief system is no different, at their funeral service they are celebrating life that was lived, but still it ends in death.

The Christian faith has the resurrection to eternal life as its corner stone. And what a cornerstone this is. Heaven is such a beautiful topic of conversation, I'm surprised we do not share more in this great subject which keeps us guessing, for within it we are filled with a wondrous and rapturous hope. For the best is still to come.

There are some strange ideas when it comes to the big question, 'What happens next?' and this is the theme of our sermon today as the Sadducees come to Jesus with a question, what they hope will dismiss any notion of the idea of a resurrection!

Truly Equal

Before we consider the context of the reading, lets get the uncomfortable reality out of the way first, which no one ever wants to speak about preferring to ignore. In life there is one true certainty which will happen to 100% of us, guaranteed. We can be assured that death is fully inclusive and truly equal, favouring no one. Nothing in life compares to the inclusivity and equality of death! No matter how rich or poor, young or old, big or small, no matter what race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation etc, death comes for us all and we can't barter with it, negotiate with it, bribe it, corrupt it, dodge it, or avoid it no matter how careful we are to eat healthily, keep fit, wear masks or self isolate. it truly is fully inclusive and adheres to its policy of equality with a great conviction and passion, favouring no one.

What bothers me most about death?

What bothers me when I think about death? This is an interesting question to consider. Many say it's not death that scares them but how we will face death that both us.

One of the reasons many don't want to think about the end of the road is, is the nothingness and lack of hope when there is no belief in the resurrection, death is so final. This means everything the atheist, agnostic, denier, rebellious humanist, has ever worked hard to achieve, all the material wealth accumulated and all our possessions will be left to someone else who will benefit at their demise.

This thought troubled Abraham, the Psalmist and even Solomon. All we have worked hard for, sacrificed to achieve, saved for will one day be given to another, who will spend it in ways we would never have done! As the Psalmist ponders this very prospect says, "For it is clear that wise men die and the senseless both perish and leave their wealth to others' (**Ps 49:10**).

Solomon the wisest of all men pondered this thought and was dismayed by its prospect saying,

“When there is a man who has laboured with wisdom, knowledge and skill and must he give his portion to a man who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune’ (**Ecc 2:21**).

Solomon was troubled by who would inherit all he had gained and knew they would use it unwisely!

Context

In our reading today, Jesus is in the last week of His public ministry and is confronted by the Pharisees and the Sadducees as they are outraged by His actions in the temple courts as He overturned the tables of the money changers. As a result an unholy alliance has formed between these two groups to rid Judea and Jerusalem of this troubling rabbi.

The Pharisees and Sadducees would not normally agree on many things, either politically or theologically. But things changed when Jesus turned up preaching. Now both of these groups felt threatened by Jesus ministry, so they united to form an unholy alliance to stand against Jesus and discredit Him and His ministry. By the end of the week their plot against Jesus seemingly succeeds, as we see Jesus hanging from a Roman cross. Have you ever noticed how people can come together who normally would not speak to each other when they have a common enemy?

We sometimes make the mistake thinking the Pharisees are the theological rigid group and some use the term Pharisee towards others as an insult, against those they think are being theologically rigid in how they interpret Scripture! In reality the Pharisees by comparison to the Sadducees were more liberal than we give them credit for. The Pharisees would look for ways to circumvent the laws of God (**see Mark 7:11**). It was the Sadducees who were the ones whose main concern was keeping the letter of the law and enforcing it with rigid enthusiasm.

The 7 husband question

Now we come to the scenario posed by the Sadducees, which is deliberately set to undermine belief in the resurrection and centres around marriage and 7 husbands.

This is an important question for the Sadducees, as they do not believe in the resurrection, so you can see why they chose to set up this illustration for their question. The question is simple, the law says, if a man dies and leaves his wife without a child then the brother next in line is to marry take her to be his wife. The law was written in this way as a way of protecting the land and inheritance.

The question the Sadducees devised pushes the Jewish law and belief to an unlikely situation saying, ‘If all seven brothers marry the same woman, whose wife will she be at the resurrection?’ If this was a real situation and I was brother number four, I would be really suspicious and very nervous about marrying this woman and would probably seek police protection!

Don’t you read the Scriptures?

This is one of those moments when Jesus answers the question directly and says, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (**Matt 22:29-30**). Jesus cuts straight to the heart of the matter telling the Sadducees they are wrong theologically, ‘Have you not read the Scriptures?’ Nor do they know the power of God! Jesus is clear, there will be a ‘resurrection...’ It is Jesus who

clearly speaks of the resurrection and tells the sadducees they are in error for NOT knowing the Scriptures, even though they prided themselves on the law. Jesus shows from Scripture what the sadducees have missed by quoting from Exodus saying, God is not the God of the dead, but of the living,” (**Matt 22:32**). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are living even though they are dead. God is not the God of corpses but of the living. We also capture proof of this at the transfiguration when Peter, James and John witness Jesus speaking with Elijah and Moses.

What is Resurrection

The resurrection witnesses to the immense power of God, hence when Jesus said, ‘You are in error for you do not know the Scriptures, nor the power of God’. As we believe God created the universe, so we also know God has power even to raise the dead to life. Only He who created life has power over death, to give life. When we speak of resurrection we are not talking about resuscitation. Resuscitation is temporarily restoring life again before death has finally come, whereas resurrection is restoring life fully and completely after death has taken the body.

At the resurrection of Jesus provides us with the supreme validation of His deity. For He told His disciples He would die and rise again. Showing His power even over death. This was witnessed by hundreds of witnesses over the 40 days before Jesus ascension (**1 Cor 15**). Many people today still make pilgrimages each year to visit the tomb of Jesus, and it is still empty! The resurrection is Jesus sign to the corrupted world, which he says is the sign of Jonah (**Matt 12:38-42**), He has power, is truth and is life and all this points to the reality of everlasting life and heavenly kingdom.

The words of Paul quoting Hosea suddenly spring to mind as the believer in Jesus looks death in the eye and can truly say, ‘Where, o death, is your victory? Where o death, is your sting?’ (**1 Cor 15:55; Hos 13:14**). Are we really so scared of death in this generation? Where is our hope in the resurrection? If we are still holding on to this world and concerned about all we possess then we are not holding on to Jesus.

How many wives/husbands.

Returning back to the question of the Sadducees and Jesus response may prompt more questions than we have answers for. For some, what Jesus is about to say may come as a relief and for others it may indeed be a little troubling, so let us consider together the words of our Lord. Jesus says,

‘At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven’ (**Matt 22:30**).

For the woman who was married 7 times in the sadducees hyperbolic illustration, I'm sure this would come as a relief to her. For those who live in unhappy and difficult marriages or who have gone through painful divorces, knowing you are not still married to this person in heaven must also come as a great relief. The Scriptures are clear, death breaks the marriage as death we are parted (**1 Cor 7:39, Rom 7:2**). Which means the one left behind is free to remarry in the law, should they be in a position to do so.

However for those who long to be united to their loved one in heaven, this verse may become a troubling verse and maybe even bring some disappointment. What I will say at this point is this, in Heaven we must remember it is perfect, there will be no sadness nor pain or tears. Whatever our relationships will be towards one another in heaven, it will be one of total harmony and perfect peace and union, unlike anything we have ever experienced in this world. So the question of the sadducees is superfluous, Jesus is clear on two points, firstly there is a resurrection and secondly relationships will be very different

in heaven than on earth. Marriage was instituted by God at the beginning of His creation for populating the world and providing a companion for Adam who was different to him and yet completed him, who would work alongside him in creation. Marriage is God's idea but in heaven procreation is no longer needed when there is no death.

What is heaven?

Did you know heaven is mentioned 276 times in the Scriptures, this is significant in Scripture which makes me wonder why we don't hear it preached more often? For those who make the bold claim that there is no heaven are not only dismissing the Scriptures as the word of God but also the One who came from heaven Himself and rose on the Third Day. There is a further dismissal that atheists also have to make, that is the desire within their own hearts for life. For we have been created with eternity in our hearts (**Ecc 3:11**), this is the reason we don't think death will happen to us. For we were created to live eternally. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, saying, He (God) has put knowledge of His existence in our hearts to know He exists, (**Rom 1:19-20**).

The resurrection and heaven may indeed sound foolish to those who are perishing, and in their thinking they have no hope either. We must remember, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world" (**1 Cor 1:20**).

Heaven is a real place, for we are told in Scriptures as heaven is the dwelling place of God (**John 14**). Isaiah sees God in a vision sitting high and mighty upon His throne as King (**Isaiah 6**). The book of Acts tells us it's the place where Jesus now resides. After Jesus resurrection, seated at the right hand of God with all authority and power (**Acts 7:55-56**).

How do we get there? The writer of Hebrews states it plainly saying, 'Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment' (**Heb 9:27**). So we don't need to worry about how to get there, the right question to ask is, 'Will I get in?' In John's gospel we discover Jesus is preparing for His own death which He knows is immanent and so comforts His disciples saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going" (**John 14:1-4**). So Jesus is coming back to take us (believers) to be with Him. So Jesus is the one who not only provides us with the way but will show us the way for He is the Way.

Summary

The evidence for the resurrection is compelling, consider the biblical evidence, the empty tomb, the hundreds of eye witnesses, the conversion of antagonists to faith in Jesus, like Saul. History is filled with skeptics turned martyrs, atheists becoming evangelists and agnostics becoming firm in the belief of Jesus resurrection. All of these strongly attest to the historicity of the resurrection. Sir Lionel's declaration:

"The evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."

Finally, as babies are within the womb, who have no concept of the world that lies beyond, a whole new world which awaits as their bodies will be transformed to engage in the world they will be born into. Just as a seed does not look like the adult plant when placed in the soil so it will be at the resurrection, when all will be revealed when our souls will be clothed with new garments fit for eternity. Why don't we speak more confidently of the resurrection to a world living in fear and anxiety of dying? Let's be more confident as Christians with a blessed hope, be bold and courageous, for the best is still to come. **Amen.**