

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Third Sunday before Advent

readings: [Job 19.23-27a](#), [2 Thessalonians 2.1-5. 13-end](#), [Luke 20.27-38](#)

6 November 2022

Among my unfortunate character flaws is a dry, deadpan sense of humour which is seen in spontaneous flippant remarks that I think are funny, but which others do not. This tendency has got me into bother in the past and will no doubt do so again.

I am not alone. It is a trap which others more eminent than me have also fallen into:

King Charles greeting Liz Truss last month when she arrived for her first weekly Prime Minister's audience, with the humorous words "Back again?" but was heard to mutter "Dear, oh dear" (quite prescient really!)

Liam Byrne, departing Chief Secretary to the Treasury in 2015, leaving a handwritten note for his Tory successor Philip Hammond saying "I'm afraid there is no money", a humorous remark which badly backfired, being used as evidence against his party for years to come.

Alan Johnson, in 2010 on being asked what his first act as Shadow Chancellor would be, flippantly replied: "to pick up a book on economics for beginners" (advice more recent and short-lived Chancellors and Prime Ministers might have benefited from).

None of these people expected their remarks to be taken seriously, but they were!

I doubt if the Sadducees in our gospel reading expected to be taken seriously with their question about marriage rights in heaven, but I rather suspect it was more a flippant piece of humour designed to discomfort those who (unlike them) believed in resurrection.

The Sadducees were a set of urban aristocrats, conservative in belief, and that belief did not encompass the concept of resurrection. They were really trying to inflame the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, to trick him into an indiscretion or into a *non-sequitur*. They had come up with what they thought was a humorous but very clever question: a question which was not a genuine seeking after knowledge, but a complex riddle containing an absurd scenario, one which they felt was a sure-fire strategy to amuse the listening crowds and publicly embarrass Jesus.

To understand the point of their question we need to recall that according to the Mosaic Law of marriage, if a Jewish man dies childless, his brother must marry the widow and produce offspring, so that inheritance and family name are preserved. Actually, it is far from likely that this law was still operative in practice in Jesus's time, but it had never been repealed (the equivalent of defacing our coinage still technically being an imprisonable offence, but if you just want to drill through a 50p piece to wear round your neck in some kind of fashion statement, then you're unlikely to have an arrest warrant put out for you).

So the Sadducees used this archaic Mosaic law to construct their clever *reductio ad absurdum* argument: Man dies, brother marries widow, brother dies, widow is married by next brother, and so on and so on. And in heaven, whose wife will then the woman be? A ridiculous scenario designed to make any belief in the concept of resurrection look ridiculous, and any defender of it equally ridiculous. Not so much seven brides for seven brothers but rather a case of one bride for seven brothers!

But in the oral interchanges of 1st century Judaism, as in the oral political exchanges of our present day, the importance of being able to deliver a quick-fire retaliatory retort is critical to survival. And Jesus proves a master of rapid riposte: easily solving the riddle and cleverly throwing back the question on the questioners by offering an authoritative rabbinical statement about Moses, Isaac, and Jacob, so authoritative that the Sadducees dare not question it further.

But his answer is more than just oratorically clever, it shows up the Sadducees for what they are: “conservatives” in the non-political sense, people so preoccupied with preserving the present age and its arcane structures that they cannot contemplate anything radically new. Sadducees who are “sad” in every sense of the word, trapped in the mindset of “this age”, obsessed by the fine details of tradition and its outdated codes, blinkered by closed minds and heavy hearts, in the face of change.

They cannot even conceive of “the new age” that is coming, where death will be overcome, where the Children of the Resurrection are the Children of God, where resurrection is not just the best bits of life re-lived, with the bad bits taken away: “pie in the sky when you die” as it’s sometimes flippantly termed, it is *transformation now*. The proof of resurrection, says Jesus, is in the power of the Living God, is in the continuity to be found in him and through him, is in the power of one who can transcend and transform death. *For God is the God not of the dead but of the living.*

The same theme is implicit in our NT lesson from the 2nd Letter to the Thessalonians. Saint Paul was writing to those who had grown anxious and agitated by claims that the long-heralded Day of the Lord, the Parousia, the Second Coming had already arrived, and were losing their faith in a God who had apparently passed them by. Not so, says Paul, and he tells them to give up on their nervous hysterical looking for the return of the Lord, and to get on with life now, to “live in the moment”, if you will. He implicitly reminds them that God’s future can be trusted because God can be trusted in the here and now. *For God is the God not of the dead but of the living.*

In preparing this sermon, my range of consulted commentaries inform me of two things about our lectionary readings for today: first that the passage from 2nd Thessalonians is (quote) “one of the most difficult passages in the whole New Testament”. Why? Because it is using terms and imagery which although perfectly familiar to those for whom it was written, it is utterly alien to us today. And second, because our gospel reading from Luke can be described as (quote) “somewhat arid”. Why? Because it deals with questions of Mosaic Law which might have been relevant in the time of Jesus and uses refutational arguments which a Rabbi might find compelling, but are somewhat irrelevant in our present-day context.

So, “alien” and “arid”. Thus I would like to thank the compilers of the Lectionary and the arrangers of the Cathedral preaching rota for this opportunity to preach today! Yet out of this seemingly “alien and arid” desert there emerge two great themes: themes of hope for the future and how to communicate that hope to our modern world.

Jesus communicated the Good News to the people in words and images, parables and stories that folk could appreciate. He talked to them in familiar language; he met them on their own ground; he took their challenges head on; he used arguments they could understand. Yet we are steeped in an ‘insider’ language of familiar liturgy and practice which though dear to us, must feel arid to those outside our doors. We must learn to express our gospel simply, cogently and effectively, across communication channels that previous generations would find unbelievably alien.

For we have a gospel to proclaim: a gospel of light over darkness, of hope over despair, of life over death. Like Job in our OT lesson, we can attest that we “know that our Redeemer lives”. *For our God is the God not of the dead but of the living.*

We have a gospel of hope for those worrying about their financial future, for those anxious about security of hearth and home, for those having to choose between heating and eating, for those in poverty and despair, and for those who feel they have no need of God, or feel abandoned by him in their present need.

To them, the gospel message is simple; it is a message of hope. Our God is the God not of the dead but of the living. And in Christ, who died for us, he has given us a supreme example of how we are called to live.

**The Revd Dr Alan Flintham
Cathedral Chaplain**