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**Alive to God (Luke 20: 27-40)**

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We're moving towards the end of the church's year. And in the narrative of the gospel of Luke, we're moving towards the end of Jesus' earthly life. The crisis that will culminate in his betrayal and death is accelerating. In the previous chapter, Jesus has entered the city of Jerusalem in triumph, acclaimed as a messianic figure. But then, in an act that our Prime Minister might describe as 'self-indulgent protest' and the 'unjustifiable economic disruption of innocent traders', he's proceeded to drive out the money-changers from the temple. 'My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers', he says, quoting from the prophets. It's an act not calculated to endear him to the authorities then, as now. So while he goes about teaching in the temple and telling 'the good news', those in power begin looking for a way to silence, to kill him – to make him a quiet Jew. And in pursuit of this end, they undertake (as Luke portrays it) a deliberate campaign to undermine his credibility and turn people against him.

To begin with, the chief priests and elders mount a fairly frontal attack – 'tell us by what authority are you doing these things?' But this doesn't get them very far, so (the text says) 'they watched and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the [Roman] governor'. Note here the attempted co-option of the secular law in service of their religio-political agenda. This is the point at which the spies pose their famous test question about taxes – 'Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?' But Jesus 'perceiving their craftiness', Luke writes, evades the trap and tells them to 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's'.

Finally, there comes a third attempt at entrapment. ‘Some Sadducees’ approach him with a theological conundrum, a test of Jesus’ spiritual understanding and credibility. And despite the fact that the Sadducees are not often in cahoots with Jesus’ usual opponents – the scribes and Pharisees – here their involvement signifies the extent to which the whole ruling system, the establishment class, has a joint interest in being rid of Jesus’ troublesome presence and proclamation. And of course, this systemic dimension of the opposition to Jesus has already been foreshadowed when Luke writes of the city of Jerusalem as a whole failing to recognize ‘the time of [its] visitation from God’ (19: 44).

So, this is the context for our reading tonight, and – at least as Luke sets up this episode – it could seem as though the particular theological conundrum the Sadducees pose is irrelevant. They could have chosen any number of tricky topics by means of which to test Jesus. The question about resurrection just happens to be the one they deploy. And yet, this doesn’t mean there’s no case to be answered. It’s true they frame it in a smart-arse kind of way ... you accept the notion of resurrection, do you Jesus? Well, try this ... there was this septet of spectacularly unfortunate brothers who died one after the other, but not before, following the law of Moses, each had married the widow of the preceding brother so as to provide her the means of support and the hope of children. ‘Finally (and no wonder, you might think) the woman herself also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her’. It’s kind of comical – a *reductio ad absurdum*. But underlying it is a profoundly serious matter and Jesus himself takes it seriously. So it’s in that spirit that I’d like us to engage it too.

Australian theologian Ben Myers has remarked: ‘Belief in bodily resurrection is one of the controlling undercurrents of the New Testament’ and a key article of Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> Yet here the Sadducees raise the basic question of how we’re to imagine what we’re talking about. It’s as if they’re saying, can we seriously speak of

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Myers, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), p.120.

real continuity between our life in this world and our post-mortem state, such that it matters (for example) how many times we've been married and to whom? Or does this example itself reveal that the whole idea of an afterlife is completely implausible, a fantasy concocted to ease our fear of oblivion? Les Murray's poem, 'Blueprint', touches on just these themes. 'Whatever the great religions offer/ it is afterlife their people want:/ Heaven, Paradise, higher reincarnations,/ together or apart –/ for these they will love God, or butter [butter up] Karma'. But is it true? Can we worthily hope for it? Many of our contemporaries think not, and no doubt many of us struggle with the idea as well.

It's undoubtedly the case that belief in resurrection profoundly shapes Christian life. For one thing, and unlike rival ancient systems of thought that denigrated matter and the body, the Christian creeds confess God as the maker, redeemer and sanctifier of this world.<sup>2</sup> Proclaiming the resurrection of the body is an unequivocal statement that the life of flesh is taken up into God rather than simply jettisoned by an immortal and immaterial soul; it's the ultimate profession that 'matter matters' and that what we do in and with our bodies has spiritual consequence.

Obviously enough, a second implication of believing in resurrection is that death is not the end of the human person. Faith holds that we're called into and held in being by a reality that can encompass and transform death itself. And this makes a radical difference to our experience of life, our capacity to live unthreatened and free. Finally, a third implication of resurrection faith is that it imagines us joined eternally to the rest of embodied life. In a third century sermon, the great theologian Origen of Alexandria pointed out that the creed does not speak of 'the resurrection of bodies' but 'the resurrection of the body'. 'Perhaps, he suggests, what is raised up on the last day will not be individuals but the body of Christ, a single person that incorporates the whole of humanity [maybe even the whole of creation?] with Jesus at its head'. Ben Myers explains Origen's logic: 'Christian hope is never just hope for

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<sup>2</sup> Myers, *The Apostles' Creed*, p.119.

myself. It is a social hope. It is hope for humanity. The only future that I may legitimately hope for is a future that also includes my neighbour'.<sup>3</sup>

So – here are three outworkings of belief in the resurrection of the body – the affirmation of the material world; the faith that our life persists in and through our death; and the hope of being joined eternally to the rest of humanity, the rest of creation, in communion with God. As St Paul expressed it, I 'am convinced that neither death, nor life, ... nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8. 38-39). It's a lovely set of ideas. But how do we get ourselves to believe them?

Well, this brings us back, I think, to Jesus and the Sadducees. Because for him, believing the resurrection follows simply from his understanding of the being of God. Jesus points to the encounter at the burning bush, where God is identified to Moses as both continuous presence – 'I AM' – *and* as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is continuously present to three people who are apparently dead. But if, says Jesus, God is the God 'not of the dead but of the living', this must mean that to God 'all of them are alive'. In other words, their being dead to the world is no impediment at all to their being alive to God. Our relationship with God is not affected by our death, and this is what belief in the resurrection really means. The afterlife is not a place, but a relationship.

How do we come to know this? Think of what it's like for Jesus at this point in his story. Here in Jerusalem, the crisis building, he is acutely present to God and God's call on his life; he's totally yielded to and infused by God's Spirit. And in this state, he's radically attuned to the difference between the aliveness and creativity of God to which he's responding, and the death-dealing and destructive futility in which those around him are competing with each other and entrapped. Jesus knows he's likely to end up dead in this world; but he also knows where the real power, the real life of things is sourced – and he speaks as one who is utterly convinced that this

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<sup>3</sup> Myers, *The Apostles' Creed*, pp.121-122.

power, this life and his communion with it cannot be broken by any death he will undergo.

What will it be like – this resurrection life? St Paul has a go at explaining it. He speaks of a seed sown in the ground and becoming a tree. It's an image that speaks of continuity – there's an identity between the seed and the tree it becomes, yet also of discontinuity – you'd never be able to guess the appearance of the tree by looking only at its seed.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Jesus speaks of identifiable individuals alive on the other side of death – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – while also assuming that in the resurrection our way of being alive will be utterly different, 'like angels'. In the end, says St Paul, it's 'mystery'; Les Murray too imagines it as, 'life like, and then unlike what mortal life has been'.

So we have to be content with unknowing. But in the end, it seems to me, what it will be like isn't the main point. Because believing in resurrection is not a fruit of speculation about the afterlife. It is rather the knowledge – born of prayer and self-yielding trust, that God lives; and that when we're held by and connected to God, we need not fear our death. For with Jesus, we too are dying into life. And what really matters about this is that we are liberated to join with him here and now in bearing God's life in the very midst of death, and so participate in transforming all the systems that deal it.

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<sup>4</sup> Myers, *The Apostles' Creed*, p.121.