

**Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 20. 27-40)**

Sarah Bachelard

In the part of Luke's gospel from which our reading comes, Jesus is under sustained attack from the religious authorities and established theological factions in Jerusalem. He's just entered the city for the last time, riding on a donkey and acclaimed by the people. He has wept over Jerusalem for its failure to 'recognise the time of its visitation from God', and driven out the merchants from the temple. He's not exactly being a friend of the status quo and not surprisingly, Luke says, 'the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard'.

So begins a series of attempts to discredit and entrap him. The chief priests, scribes and elders challenge his authority to teach in the temple, they send 'spies' to quiz him about paying taxes to the emperor, and the Sadducees set him up with what they take to be a knock-down argument for the absurdity of his teaching about resurrection. On every occasion, it is the authorities who come off undermined by these encounters – a bit like Wylie Coyote in the Road Runner cartoon, endlessly trying to kill his nemesis and succeeding only in blowing up himself. On every occasion, Jesus refuses to engage their 'clever' questions within the confines of the terms they offer. He inhabits a larger world than they do, and it is that larger, freer world that he is constantly seeking to make visible. Take the doctrine of resurrection as an example.

Resurrection is a question by which we, like the Sadducees, can become entrapped – assessing its probability and trying to imagine the nature of resurrection life

according to the world as we think we know it. But Jesus starts not here – not with our categories. He starts with his experience of God. For Jesus, faith in resurrection is an expression of faith in the nature of God, not a hypothesis about what happens to us after we die. God is bigger than human life and human death. Death does not cancel our relationship with God, and it is our relationship with God that is the source of our life. That is why, for God, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are all alive. St Paul expresses exactly this faith when he writes: ‘We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s’ (Rom. 14.8). What that looks like exactly in ‘the next life’, who knows? What matters is how faith in this reality transforms the possibilities of our living, now, with confidence and the knowledge of our unshakeable belonging.

So this encounter of Jesus with the Sadducees is one of many where we see him speaking and living from the knowledge of a different reality, inhabiting a different imaginative horizon and set of assumptions about how the world is and must be. Some then naturally thought he was mad, a dangerous blasphemer. But others recognised in his words truth and life, an authority which they could not explain but would not deny. “Teacher, you have spoken well” (Luke 20.39).

Many people have already asked me about the pilgrimage – what it was like, what reflections I have about it, what new insights. In many ways I feel still too close to it to be able to distil much – and over the next few weeks I hope to do that – and we’ll have an occasion where we share with you about our journey. But one thing is already emerging for me as a renewed source of energy for my own life and for my sense of the life of this community.

As I return to you, I am more than ever convicted that the issue of our theological imagination – our taken-for-granted background pictures of God, of the world, of human possibility and vocation – shape us in profound ways. I am more than ever convicted that a distorted, or stifling, or legalistic theological imagination has a profound influence on our world – not just on the kinds of churches we get and on the practice of Christian communities, but also for our capacity to engage creatively and with truer perception with issues like climate change, ageing, peace-making and justice, on what it means to be a human being and to live faithfully a human life.

Many of the people we met on our pilgrimage – maybe most – were one way or another grappling with questions like these ... often they were in transition in their own lives, and seeking to be open to new directions, purpose and service. Many of them – maybe most – could not ‘hear’ in the experience of Christianity they had known – any responses to their questions that they had found to be in any way relevant or life-giving or illuminating. The Christian testimony was simply not on their radar, and Christian worship the relic of a bygone age.

But here’s the thing. The testimony that the true horizon of life is a reality of abundance, vitality and grace rather than scarcity, death and fear – that makes a difference to how we see the world. It makes a difference to the kinds of choices we might be willing to make, the risks we might run, the revenge or competitiveness we might forgo. It makes a difference to how we engage our own ageing, how we care for others and for the planet. The imaginative horizon within which we live is operative – whether we are conscious of it or not – and Jesus’ theological imagination is radically different to the world’s business as usual.

But, as John Main the teacher of Christian meditation said, the church can only proclaim what it *is*. It can only proclaim what it is in the process of experiencing. Simply to say these words – abundance, forgiveness, grace – is useless and a dead letter, unless communities of people witness by their own transformed experience of their lives and human possibilities that such words *do* connect to reality, that they *are* truthful and capable of being lived from. Only this is what gives these words authority – the authority that his contemporaries recognised in Jesus.

And this is what excites me so much about returning to you at Benedictus, and gives me a renewed sense of our vocation together. Through our contemplative practice, we open ourselves week by week, day by day, to being drawn into the reality from which Jesus comes, to knowing it for ourselves at deeper and deeper levels. Experiences of unfreedom, fear, dying, anxiety and pain continue to be part of our lives and will be until the end – yet even so we come to know for ourselves, despite all appearances to the contrary, that these are not ultimate – and that underlying these sufferings is the peace and plenitude and life of the reality that Jesus called ‘Father’. It is as together we grow in this knowledge born of experience that we may be among those transforming the imaginative horizon of human life, and so renewing our world. This is truly a gift our world needs. It is good to be with you again.