



There's a great reflection on this Gospel reading in the Church Times this week – and the punchline goes something like this....

I quote...

'Verse 32 tells us that after having seven husbands and trying to make babies with each one of them, the woman also dies! Frankly, who could be surprised'.

This reading isn't really about marriage –

The Sadducees are simply testing Jesus.

They don't care about the answer because as far as they are concerned, they already know it. Just before this, the pharisees – the Sadducees religious rivals – had tried to test him too with their trick question about paying taxes to Caesar.

Remember that one? – the question then was who do we pay our taxes to? And Jesus' reply – remember that - render to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's. The Pharisees had tried to trick Jesus into saying something that would cause him trouble. But he outwitted them and their cynicism.

That fact didn't slow down the Sadducees. They had formulated an even more elaborate word trap for Jesus. And it is a word trap – a trap of logic if you will.

It goes like this – there is a ruling that if a man died without having children, a brother might marry the widow to have children on his dead brother's behalf. So, she could end up being married more than once! Will she be married to more than one man in the afterlife? But that's adultery.

The Sadducees were the literalists of the day. And since the Hebrew Bible says nothing much about any afterlife, the Sadducees didn't believe in it.

And they want to trap Jesus into agreeing with them.

So, they come up with this over-the-top story about one woman who married seven brothers in a row under the law, (the law that allowed, remember, a man to marry his dead brother's widow) she married seven - none of whom fathered a child with her before they died one by one. She herself survived them all and then died childless.

Now then, they say to Jesus, if she has married more than once legally, and if she is now in heaven with all her husbands, whose wife will she be. A man can have more than one wife on the go, but a woman can't have more than one husband on the go. See the dilemma?

If all eight of them were resurrected and lived on in an afterlife, they would be in the illegal and impossible situation of one woman having seven husbands. In heaven!

Ergo, Obviously, there can't be an afterlife!

Jesus didn't bat an eye.

Unlike Jesus I fell into the trap of thinking this reading is about marriage – and preparing this sermon I read loads around the subject.

I needed to. It is one of those topics when you really need to know what the scholars think – those who have invested time in exegesis, probably speak Latin and/or Greek and have the nuanced understanding - and so I read scholars – and they all seemed to me to think something a little different.

I also learned a lot about marriage and how it was viewed in Biblical times.

You know, in Mosaic law it was important that the man's name was not blotted out. IN Deuteronomy - If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

This question was about the bloodline. That was the legal, scriptural reason for this and any kind of marriage. If remarriage protected the woman from destitution that was incidental.

Marriage in Jesus' day was very different from what many people think of as marriage today. It had nothing to do with love, - the concept of marriage as a relationship based on *love* developed in human society only within the last two or three centuries, and it has become widespread only within the last century or so.

For Jesus' listeners, and throughout most of human history, marriage was what we today would call a contractual and business relationship. Its purpose was to provide financial advantages and social recognition to married couples and their families and to perpetuate the family's lineage, property, and inheritance. Status.

And as Jesus says, that sort of marriage does not exist in heaven. There is no need for it there.

"The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage,

Boom...

Heaven isn't about inheritance, or status. Or role.

The Saducees were trying to score points, not address with an open heart some deep and real theological conundrum.

This passage is not about marriage.

This is about using the institution of marriage to try and defend an already established theological position.

What the passage really teaches us is not whether a couple who are deeply in love and committed will be together in the afterlife, but that there will be no marriage as human transaction, as status, as bloodline.

After all my research I do not know if there will be marriage in heaven – but I know there will be love. God is Love and that is all I need to know.

Will there be marriage in heaven is just one question?

And this afternoon, we will be holding a service for the bereaved – and there will be unspoken questions as there always are around the subject of grief and death– will I see my loved one again, why do people have to die, where is God when it hurts. The questions are good – unlike the Sadducee's question, they are cries from the heart - and God hears them.

You will have your own.

Questions about faith, about meaning, about God, deserve nuanced, honest, gentle and pastoral answers.

We don't need to be right.

We don't need to hold our Bible aloft and stand ten feet above contradiction. That way dogmatism lies. That way the Sadducees questions lies.

We are not dogmatists - we are servants of the spirit not masters of the law. Servants of the Spirit of Love

Listen to that hymn we will sing at the end of this service. Dear Lord and father of Mankind. It contains three of the most exquisitely beautiful lines ever written in a hymn.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity
Interpreted by love!

Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity
Interpreted by love!

The silence of eternity – we follow a living God who loves us, who came to this world for us, and who died and rose again for us. We do not follow a rule book. The closer we walk with Jesus, the closer we are to all truth and all answers. But mind the paradox – when we think we have all the answers, then we have none of the answers.

Remember Job's lesson. You're God – I'm not. I get it.

The hugest learning curve for us all.

And in the end what does Job know, really know, 'I know that my redeemer lives'.

Sometimes., for all of us, God seems very quiet – we need answers, for ourselves for others, but they don't come. And so, in in desperation, or wanting

closure, or a desire for certainty – people do love certainty - we fill that silence of unanswered questions with what God would say if only he thought like me.

You must do this to be saved; this must happen; that interpretation of scripture is wrong, this is wrong.

Believe me, there is right and wrong – there is absolute truth. But we do not always know it.

The only absolute truths, I believe, are these.

God is Love.

Jesus is God.

We are made in the image of God – we are made for Love.

In Heaven there will be love so perfect we cannot begin to imagine it. The silence of eternity – interpret it with love.

Will I find my wife in heaven?

Will we have bodies?

Is this right? Is that wrong?

Jesus makes it clear there won't be marriage as it has historically been understood – but we can be sure, we can be sure there will be love in heaven. For God is Love.