

**LUKE 20:27-38**  
**ST JOHN'S, 6.11.16, 9.30 am**

**INTRODUCTION**

“It is easier to judge a person’s mental capacity by their questions than by their answers.” So said the Duc de Levis.<sup>1</sup> Maybe Jesus would have said, ‘It is easier to judge a person’s spiritual state by their questions than by their answers’. Chapter 20 of Luke's gospel is full of questions thrown at Jesus – *Tell us, what right have you to do these things? Who gave you this right?* (v 2); *tell us, is it against our Law for us to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?* (v 22); and then the question in our passage this morning, about rising from death. The people asking these questions aren't seeking the truth from Jesus; they're not even interested in his opinion. They're trying to trip Jesus up, to trick him into saying something which can be classed as heresy, so that they can discredit him, because he's threatening their power-base. But Jesus knows what they're trying to do, and he's more than able to show them up for what they are. After Jesus' reply in our passage, we're told, *they did not dare ask him any more questions* (v 40).

**THE SADDUCEES, WHO SAY THAT PEOPLE WILL NOT RISE FROM DEATH**

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus has been debating with the *chief priests and the teachers of the Law, together with the elders*, or their representatives (vv 1,19). In our passage, it's the turn of the Sadducees. The Sadducees were mostly members of the rich upper classes within Jewish society. They wanted political power for

themselves, and in order to gain it, they co-operated with the Roman occupying power. In terms of their religious beliefs, they only accepted what was written in Scripture; unlike the Pharisees, who considered oral tradition to be just as important. As it says here, the Sadducees believed *that people will not rise from death* (v 27), and so they come to Jesus and try to ridicule the idea of resurrection with their ridiculous story.

The custom the Sadducees refer to is called levirate marriage. In Deuteronomy 25, we read this: *If two brothers live on the same property and one of them dies, leaving no son, then . . . it is the duty of the dead man's brother to marry [his brother's widow]. The first son that they have will be considered the son of the dead man, so that his family line will continue in Israel* (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). The most well-known example of levirate marriage is Ruth's marriage to Boaz (see Ruth 4). We don't think that this custom was still followed in Jesus' time, so the Sadducees' example is not only ridiculous, but purely academic. But they could argue that this provision was made in the Law, and that it implies that there can't be a resurrection.

**JESUS, WHO SHOWS THAT THE DEAD ARE RAISED TO LIFE**

Jesus' reply to the Sadducees rejects two false presuppositions which they'd made. Firstly, they'd effectively said, "Let's suppose for a moment that the dead *will* rise – that resurrection life will basically be a 'new improved' version of life as we know it." The Sadducees' second false presupposition was that the relationship formed between God and

each of us in this life is only temporary – it comes to an end when we die.

Jesus replies to the first false presupposition by saying, in effect, "No, resurrection life will definitely *not* be life as we know it". In relation to the scenario which the Sadducees have portrayed, Jesus says there will be three significant differences for those who rise from death.

Firstly, they won't marry; marriage is necessary in this life – it won't be necessary in the life to come. Secondly, they cannot die; as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15: *when the trumpet sounds, the dead will be raised, never to die again, and we shall all be changed. For what is mortal must be changed into what is immortal; what will die must be changed into what cannot die* (1 Corinthians 15:52-53). Where there's no death, there's no need to multiply the human race, and therefore there's no need for marriage. Thirdly, those who rise from death *will be like angels . . . they are the children of God* (v 36). The relationship which believers already enjoy with their heavenly Father here on earth will be made perfect in heaven; their relationships with one another will be made perfect, even as they are made perfect. Again, in this scenario, there's no need for marriage.

The Sadducees' second false presupposition was that that the relationship formed between God and each of us in this life is only temporary – it comes to an end when we die. Jesus replies to it by referring to a key passage, the one *about the burning bush*, in which God reveals his name (v 37). When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, it was centuries after Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had

died. And yet, God identified himself to Moses as *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob* (see Exodus 3:6). If the Sadducees were right, and there's no resurrection from the dead, then God was identifying himself to Moses as the God of non-existent beings! But as Jesus says, *he's the God of the living, not of the dead, for to him all are alive* (v 38). If God is eternal, then a relationship with him is also eternal – so believers' relationships with God in this life continue after we physically die.

### **THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO ARE WORTHY TO RISE FROM DEATH**

In verse 35, Jesus refers to *the men and women who are worthy to rise from death and live in the age to come*. There's a reminder here that life in the age to come isn't open to anyone and everyone; Jesus is only talking about those who *are worthy*. Let's think about who they might be.

Actually, the GNB isn't the best translation – most others have something along the lines of 'the men and women who are *considered* worthy . . .' So these men and women aren't people who've done anything to *earn* their resurrection life; they're people whom the Lord *considers worthy*; in other words, people who've put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, recognising that he's their only hope; people who, along with Abraham, have put their trust in the Lord, and so been accepted by him (Genesis 15:6).

## CONCLUSION

The question about rising from death is crucially important, and so this story appears in each of the first three Gospels. The question is crucial to who Jesus is: if there's no such thing as resurrection, Jesus isn't Messiah, or Saviour. It's crucial to our faith: if there's no such thing as resurrection, Paul says, *you have nothing to believe . . . your faith is a delusion and you are still lost in your sins* (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17).

So, praise the Lord that there is such a thing as resurrection; that we know that Jesus was raised from the dead, and that (again going back to 1 Corinthians 15) *the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised* (1 Corinthians 15:20). If we've put our faith and trust in the Lord, then we too will be considered *worthy to rise from death and live in the age to come*. And as Paul puts it earlier in that letter, *What no one ever saw or heard, what no one ever thought could happen, is the very thing God prepared for those who love him* (1 Corinthians 2:9). Brothers and sisters, we have so much to look forward to, as we enjoy our eternal relationship with our Lord!

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in A Bucket of Surprises, compiled by J John & Mark Stibbe, (London, Monarch, 2002), p 166