

As I was going to St Ives, I met a man with seven wives... Many of you are probably familiar with this nursery rhyme puzzle from childhood. But have you ever wondered how many of those wives the man was married to in heaven?

Such riddles can be entertaining when they're shared between friends. But when the design is simply to catch an opponent out, like a politician at Prime Ministers' Questions, they can become a much darker thing, closing off open and honest engagement with those whose worldviews differ from our own.

We know that the Sadducees' question to Jesus is in bad faith. Luke tells us explicitly that the Sadducees don't even believe in resurrection, so their only motivation for asking Jesus about the scenario they describe must be to try to catch him out. Jesus knows this, too, and rather than taking their question at face value, he reframes the terms of debate. He challenges them in their own assumptions, that our life in the resurrection will follow or can be understood in the same terms as the life we live now. As he says, they are thinking like those who belong only to this age.

The provisions of Mosaic law were designed primarily for those living in this age; if a man dies, leaving his wife childless, then remarriage to his brother allows protection for the woman and a descendant for the man. Such concerns become irrelevant in the resurrected life. Jesus tells the Sadducees - and by extension us - that in the resurrection our identities will no longer be centred on the relationships we have in this life, whether to our partners, our parents or our children. Rather, our primary relationship will be with God, because it is God who gives us new life in the resurrection, making us his children.

In this context, Jesus's statement that we will be like the angels has less to do with answering the Sadducees' original question than with the way he reframes their perspective. He is not looking to lead us into endless debates about whether we will have bodies or intimate relationships in heaven. When we ask these questions, we're still chained to thinking in the same terms that we think now. In saying that we will be like the angels, he is instead telling us that our whole way of living, and the focus of our interests and desires, will be changed in the resurrection life. As children of the resurrection, no longer subject to death, we will be freed to reorder our desires, to live a life of full abundance without the anxieties that preoccupy us now.

But in speaking of anxiety, we reach the heart of Jesus's response to the Sadducees. We have already seen that he is not naïve, that he recognises their underlying motivations and refuses to be caught out by them. But he goes further than this; he recognises that they have deeper concerns and motivations still, ones that they may or may not even be aware of in the moment they make their challenge to him. And this is the level at which he concludes his response to them, speaking beyond their surface innocence, beyond their hidden malice, to the deep humanity at their core.

For Jesus sees that the Sadducee's choice of example in challenging the notion of resurrection is at root neither frivolous nor random. In a world where death is the final word, what is there

to ensure that our memory will endure? In our world now, many still look to their children to fill this role, but many too remain childless, whether involuntarily or by choice. In whatever state we find ourselves, we can wonder what if anything will remain of us after we die.

You may have heard it said that the evil people do dies with them while the good remains; conversely, we find in Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* saying the exact opposite. The truth is, we simply do not know and cannot control how we will be remembered, if we are remembered at all, in this world. And without that assurance, we can quickly be reduced to a more general questioning of our lives, their purpose and their meaning. Not that it is impossible to find meaning in a life limited to our present conditions, as many atheists will attest that they do. But the problem certainly hits us in a different, and challenging way.

So Jesus meets them in this underlying state of deeply human anxiety. He argues that the dead are raised using only a belief that he knows the Sadducees share – a belief in the authority of the Torah, or Mosaic scriptures. From this he tells them that God is the God of the living, and that to God both living and dead are all alive. The resurrected life may be completely beyond anything we can imagine, but it is a true and sure promise. Those who have gone before us remain in God's care; and however quickly our own names and deeds may be forgotten by those who come after us, we will never be forgotten by God.

What does this encounter tell us? We find here a reminder that God can see through the ways in which we deceive others and ourselves, and he knows our underlying motivations. But unlike many of us in our own encounters, he doesn't stop at unmasking our misdeeds and bad intentions. In Jesus we see him here as the ultimate teacher, reframing our assumptions and redirecting our desires; and we see him above all in his loving mercy, looking beyond both the good and the bad in us and coming to meet us in our deepest anxiety and need. Whatever the disappointments and tragedies we face in our lives, however great the grief we feel when we lose or never find the people who sustain us here and now, God has not left us alone. Through the promise of resurrection, he reminds us that he is the God not only of us here, but of all of those who've gone before us and will go after, and even in the midst of pain or sin he continues to call us into the abundance of his life and his love.

What do we learn here of how we should follow this God now? We could do worse than to follow Jesus' example. That is, we should feel empowered to face up squarely to all the deception we encounter in our world, in our churches, and even in ourselves, to the traps that are laid for us, the abuses of authority, the cynicism underlying so much of what is sold to us. We can recognise the evil in our world without falling prey to it, but we do this not by becoming cynical ourselves, ever ready to unmask every good deed, but by going deeper. We can recognise that our motivations, both good and bad, are never simple, and that in each of us we generally find a common core of human need and vulnerability, asking – whether we know it or not - to be met in love and mercy by the God of Jesus, of the Sadducees, of those we have lost and of all of us here. And let us pray that such insight might make us slow to judge, quick to compassion, and ever ready to draw confidence from the God who will not abandon us even in death, whatever else comes our way.