

Pentecost 22
Sermon – Luke 20:27-39

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

It's been a big year. This thought has been going around in my mind for the last month, ever since I got home and have been able to draw breath after a rather tumultuous 12 months. And as I proof read the annual report last week, I thought, here at Christ Church, we've also had a big year. And even Australia has had a big year with a federal election, and now we're facing devastating fires in NSW and QLD. For my part, I've been challenged by health issues, my own and my mother's, and by significant changes here at my place of ministry at Christ Church. For us as a community, we have also been challenged, out of our comfort zone, and asked to engage with a different way, a different leadership style.

How do we approach such times? I'd like to say that I always approach challenges with grace, patience and kindness, but I would be lying! Our Gospel story today is drawn from chapter 20 of Luke's Gospel and throughout the chapter there is a series of disputes that Jesus has with the religious types of his day: the Priests, the Scribes and the Sadducees. In this chapter, Jesus shows us how to respond in times of challenge. On multiple occasions he is set up to be trapped with tricky, and it could be said, disingenuous questions, but Jesus manages these situations with grace, dignity and integrity. So I thought it would be good to look at our Gospel reading today, a prime example of one of these disingenuous questions given to Jesus, and marvel at his response, and the great hope of resurrection.

Well, if I thought I'd been under the pump this year, just imagine what it would be like to be Jesus at this particular point in time. Remember, that Luke had set out to write an orderly account, so that we would know the truth about Jesus and his teachings. And in this orderly account, we find ourselves today with Jesus, sandwiched between his triumphal entry into Jerusalem in chapter 19 and his Passion which plays out in chapters 22 and 23. We also know that Jesus is very aware of his fate. In chapter 18, he predicts to his disciples, for the third time, his death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

With this knowledge, Jesus is teaching in the temple and is being challenged by the chief priests and scribes, firstly about his authority to teach, then with the question about paying taxes to which he famously replies “Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”. The third challenge in this chapter, about resurrection, is our Gospel reading today.

I wonder what it would have been like to respond to this question? The question of whose wife will the hapless, childless widow be, in the resurrection, seems somewhat ludicrous in today’s context. And I think that if the subject of resurrection wasn’t such a core part of our Christian faith, Jesus would have considered the question ludicrous as well – perhaps he did!

And what about the questioners? The Sadducees? What does this question say about these religious people, one of the sections within the Jewish faith at the time? Well firstly, they ask their question, in the hope of trapping Jesus, quoting Moses, on a subject that is biblically contested. Remember Henry 8th? He sought to divorce his first wife, who was also his brother’s widow, quoting another part of scripture saying not to marry your brother’s widow. These situations demonstrate the human propensity to pick out individual pieces of scripture to make a point, something that still happens regularly today in religious circles.

But the question itself also demonstrates a somewhat crass and worldly understanding by the Sadducees when it comes to their faith. As a group who didn’t believe in resurrection, they had hoped to ridicule Jesus with this question of 7 husbands and one wife. Instead it gave him the opportunity to not only rebut them in a scriptural sense but also to describe the nature of our resurrected life. First, he addresses the nature of resurrection when he says:

“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”

Our resurrected life is not an extension or repetition of this life, where we might marry, own property, or have fallings out with friends and family! It will be a life of perfect union

with God and with each other, where we are like angels. This week a facebook friend posted on the anniversary of the death of her father. She said “Four years ago you got your angel’s wings.” Because I had been contemplating this text, I marveled at the power of so many of Jesus’ metaphors to cross into our modern conversation. And I marveled at how articulate and calm Jesus was in such an intense and problematic situation.

But Jesus isn’t done yet! Quoting Moses back at the Sadducees, he refutes their lack of belief in the resurrection by saying:

“And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

This description of God in relationship with three Jewish patriarchs, long gone from their earthly existence, implies the ongoing life of those with whom God remains in relationship with. The relationship that God seeks with humanity, with us, here and now, transcends our death, our mortal life.

When at the beginning of the week, I read our readings for today, I felt somewhat daunted and challenged about preaching on the Gospel text. But as I let it sit with me over the week, I’d like to think that God gave me inspiration to break open the text today. What do we do with this in times of change and challenge? I think the answer is in the word relationship. We need to be in relationship with God and with each other, just as the Deacon often says at the beginning of our weekly service:

‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ Jesus said: ‘This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

So let us focus on this, our relationship with God and with each other. For our relationship with God is an enduring one, today, tomorrow and forever.