Jesus and the Sadducees
Luke 20:27-44

When I was a boy I was taught that at polite dinner parties two of the things you should never talk about are politics and religion. Which, if you're English, really only leaves you the weather – and, let's face it, we are experts at that!

Well, as we saw last week, the religious leaders have just tried to skewer Jesus with politics and failed, so now they try and kebab him with theology.

And you've got to remember that this was more than petty theological point scoring. The leaders want rid of Jesus, they want to undermine His credibility with the people. They want to hole Him below the water line. They want to show that the kind of stuff this religious teacher, from the backwoods of Galilee, believes is fairy-tale nonsense, it's flying-spaghetti monster stuff. They want to show Jesus is unsophisticated and can't be trusted, so why waste your time listening to Him?

But if they had an agenda in trying to nail Jesus, they also had an agenda in disbelieving in resurrection in the first place, with some interesting parallels to today.

Resurrection: why deny it?
Now Luke helpfully tells us who these leaders were who tried to bowl the curved ball: they were Sadducees.

And the Sadducees were the establishment elite. So far in Luke's gospel, we've really only encountered the Pharisees. This is the first time the Sadducees get a mention, and that's for a reason. You see, whilst you might find a member of the Pharisees living just about anywhere, you only found Sadducees in Jerusalem, and Jesus has only just arrived in Jerusalem. And these guys were the original Washington or Whitehall insiders. They were priests descended from Zadok the high priest, so they were a kind of Jewish aristocracy. They were privileged, wealthy and ready to co-operate with the occupying Roman forces.

And they did so for a reason. You see, the Sadducees were also rationalistic: this life was all there is – one life and that's it. No life after death. Death is the end. Full stop. In Luke's words, they denied that there is a resurrection.

Now, with the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, the Sadducees became extinct. Or did they? Because, let's face it, the Sadducees are hardly alone in thinking this life is all there is, and death is it. And whilst you won't find them wearing flowing robes, you'll find modern Sadducees just about everywhere – on campus, in your classroom, in your office, on the television – and, tragically, even in churches. They're the guys who deny that there is anything else other than this physical world, no life beyond the grave, no final accounting before God, no chance that God might actually intervene in this world of ours.

Now, looking at this through a Christian lens, we might be tempted to think of the Sadducees as the theological liberals, but they weren't. These were the religious conservatives. You see, by Jesus' time, they had become the minority. Almost everyone else in Judaism had by now become convinced from the

prophets that at the end of time, on the last day, there was going to be a resurrection of the dead; that God would intervene dramatically and once and for all, and finally, vindicate His suffering people and raise them from the dead.

So why didn't the Sadducees just go with the theological flow? Why did they, alone amongst all the Jewish sects, hold out against the idea of the resurrection? And the answer is, because they had everything to lose. The idea that God will raise the dead in a final, last day act of judgment and reward was, and is, revolutionary. And they wanted to preserve the status quo. They were doing pretty well out of life, thank you very much. They had power and influence and money and position, and the idea that that might all be overturned and that God might call them to account was not something they leaped at. It would be like a turkey voting for Christmas.

But they also had present day, *now* reasons for denying it. You see, if you believe that this life is *not* all there is, that your enemy can kill you, but that's not the end, and God will raise you up and vindicate you on the last day, then death has lost its sting, and you have nothing to lose in challenging the establishment and opposing the powers that be, like the Romans and their bedfellows the Sadducees. So whilst the Sadducees had everything to lose, the fact of a future resurrection inspired others to believe that they had nothing to lose. So, can you see how belief in resurrection was revolutionary? And the Sadducees rejected it to conserve their own power.

Now just take a step back, and take a look at today, maybe even at your own life, and ask yourself, 'has anything much changed?' The idea that there is a God before whom we will all give account, who will raise people from the dead and judge them, is not exactly music to the ears of post-modern people. No wonder the idea that God is dead, or never was, is seen as liberating; after all it frees you from any sense that you are accountable. But also, just as in the time of the Sadducees, if the belief in resurrection were to inspire you and me to acts of self-sacrifice for the sake of God and His kingdom – regardless of the cost – knowing that this life is not all there is, then you can see why resurrection has lost none of its revolutionary power.

But the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection. They didn't *want* to believe it, and, as far as they were concerned there was no mention of it in the first 5 books of the Bible, the only ones they took to be authoritative. So, resurrection was impossible, and they had a little story to prove just how absurd believing in it was.

Verse 28, 'and they asked [Jesus] a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother." And of course they were right: in Deuteronomy 25:5 that is exactly what Moses said. A younger, unmarried brother must take his dead brother's widow and raise a family for his brother through her, to preserve his brother's family line.

So, they're quoting the Bible: they've got their verses to prove their point. They're like the person who takes offense at what the Bible teaches about any kind of sex outside of heterosexual marriage being wrong and quotes the Levitical food laws at you – 'well, the Bible says you mustn't eat shellfish and you don't obey that' and thinks they've 'gotchya!'; without understanding that Jesus revoked the food laws but not the sex laws. And the Sadducees *think* they know what the Bible says, while all the time, as Jesus makes clear in Matthew and Mark's account, their very error was that they didn't know their Bible well enough.

But having quoted the Bible, then comes their slam dunk, their-out-of-the-park hit, their knock-out punch, their match-winning try and it's a story, a funny story designed to show just how ludicrously funny belief in the resurrection is.

There was a family with seven brothers, and the oldest brother got married, but promptly died before they could have kids, so the second one had to marry his widow; but he also died before they could go forth and multiply; so the third one had to marry her, but lo and behold! he too keeled over before they had managed to get it together. Now, just imagine if you were brother number 4, or 5, or 6 or 7. And you've watched one after another of your older brothers get married to this woman and then a few weeks later you've heard the wailing coming from the house next door, and you've watched another corpse being carried out. And you've got this sick, sinking feeling in your stomach. And it's the day of the funeral of your latest brother to die in her arms, and the earth has not long been sprinkled on the grave, and the guests are still hanging around at the wake consoling your sister-in-law – again - and your father approaches you… 'Son, you know your duty, now it's your turn to go into bat. In you go.' Dad no! Please! You can't do that to me, she'll be the death of me!

And this lady manages to get through seven husbands. Now, I think Su would tell you that one husband is *more* than enough for one life, but seven! And so, not surprisingly, v32, 'the woman also died.' I reckon of nervous exhaustion, just imagine the stress of all that wedding planning!

And then comes their question: v33, 'In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will she be?' I mean, you've got seven candidates to pick from Jesus! She's got a whole house full of husbands! And their point is, that if the law teaches this about marriage, it obviously implies there can be no such thing as resurrection.

Now, while they tell it as a joke – their point is serious isn't it? I mean, they may have an agenda, resurrection may be a threat to them and how they live, but their point is a serious one. Aren't they justified in thinking there is something inherently ludicrous in believing God is going to raise the dead? And, of course, if they are right then this is serious. Jesus has claimed to be *the* resurrection and the life; and He has banked His own future on the resurrection. And not only that, but resurrection is at the heart of the Christian gospel. So if these Sadducees are right it's not just Jesus who gets to look stupid –we get to join the stupid party too.

Well, if Jesus' answer to the political question on tax left the leaders in stunned silence, His answer to this one on theology leaves them unwilling to ask any further questions.

Resurrection: why believe it?
Now, no doubt you have heard the expression that goes something like, you can be so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly use. Which whilst I understand what it's getting at is, frankly, cobblers – you can never be too heaven minded, you can never be too standing-before-Christ-on-the-last-day, eternal-perspective, resurrection minded. Frankly we are not enough so-minded. And, Jesus answers their question in two ways. And the first way he answers it is to take that phrase about being too heavenly minded and He turns it on its worldly-minded head.

He effectively tells the Sadducees that the reason they don't understand resurrection is that they are too *this age* minded. V34: 'And Jesus said to them, "The sons of *this age* marry…" but things are going to be different in the age to come. The reason you don't get this is because you are thinking about the *future* age in terms if *this* age. Your world-view is too small, it's too constrained. You're like a man who retreats into a large cardboard box, refusing to believe there's a whole world outside that box, and who thinks that everything is made of cardboard.

And the reason marriage won't be necessary, Jesus says, is that there will be no death, v36, 'for they cannot die anymore' – like angels, those who are resurrected to life and the new creation will be immortal. Death will be abolished. And if there is no death, there won't be any need to marry and have children and preserve the family line either. So, whilst there is continuity with now - it's you, the real you, who gets resurrected - there will also be discontinuity: life will not be the same. But, if you are just living for now, for this age, you won't be able to see beyond the cardboard to the glorious future that awaits.

But what if you hear that and think, 'but I want to spend eternity with my wife or husband. I want there to be marriage in the resurrection.' Well, if you think like that, I reckon you're in good company. Su and I and the girls just loved spending time with Wallace and Lindsey Benn. And one reason for that was that after so many years of marriage they were still obviously in love – and we love being around people like that. And Wallace and I were chatting and we agreed that for us this was possibly the hardest of Jesus' teachings to swallow. I mean, I want my relationship with Su to go on and on. Now, I know you think that after however many years of marriage, by the time of the resurrection Su will probably need some respite care, but that's how I feel. Now whilst the Bible is short on details of what lies ahead, if you also struggle with this, just ask yourself, do you think that the new creation life that awaits us in the new age, the other side of the resurrection is going to be better or worse than now? Do you think that our relationships of love and capacity for love will be greater or less than now? You see, what we know and experience now is just a shadow of the reality that awaits us. As CS Lewis would call it, *now* is just Shadowlands.

But, the tragedy of course is that so many, these Sadducees included, would rather live for the shadow than the reality.

But the second way Jesus answers them is by taking the game to them on their own turf. He could have taken them to Isaiah or Ezekiel or Daniel who all talk explicitly about resurrection. But He doesn't. Instead He camps out on their front lawn. He goes to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible they counted as authoritative. And He goes to the central story in those 5 books, in Exodus 3, where God reveals Himself to Moses at the burning bush, and tells Moses His name, I AM WHO I AM, and tells Moses that He is going to deliver the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. And that hugely symbolic event, Jesus says, God appearing in the burning bush, has resurrection written all over it.

V37-8, "But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him."

Now, you may read that and think, hang on a minute, that has got nothing to do with resurrection! Why is that a knock out blow?

For two reasons. Firstly, you have to understand that in the Judaism of Jesus' day, there were only two positions on the resurrection. It wasn't going to happen. You died and that was it – game up, no life after death, just feast day for the worms, which was the Sadducees' position. And the other was, you died but your soul continued in some post-death state until the end of time when God would raise you from the dead – which was what the Pharisees' and just about everyone else believed. Those were the only two positions. So, if God describes Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the *present* tense, 'I *am* their God' - they must be alive with Him now in some way – because a dead person who the worms have eaten is dead and can't be in relationship with anyone not even God. And if they are alive now with God, in ongoing, living relationship with Him, that means God will, in the future, raise them from the dead. There are only two teams and Jesus has just shown that Moses was batting for Team Resurrection, not Team Sadducee.

But the second reason this encounter at the Burning Bush delivers the knock out blow, is that Jesus links the resurrection to God's covenant faithfulness. You see, by the time God appears to Moses at the Burning Bush, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are long since dead. And yet, they had not seen the final fulfillment of all that God had promised them. And if they were to see it, if God *was* still their God as He says he is, then He will have to raise them from the dead and deliver them from death just as he was about to deliver their descendants from slavery in Egypt. And so Jesus is saying, to them and to us, if you are tempted to doubt the resurrection, you simply have to trust God, that He will be faithful to His promises, even in the face of death.

Well, they failed to trap Him politically and now they've failed theologically, so now it's Jesus' turn to ask a question.

The question that really matters
Now we may have loads of questions about God and Christ and Heaven and Hell and the Bible that we wrestle with and could argue about until we are blue in the face. But there is one question on which everything else hangs and that is, 'who is Jesus?' Get that right and most other stuff begins to fall into place.

You see, the people were expecting a Messiah who would be a descendant, a son of David, their greatest King. They were looking for a human Messiah who would fight their battles, who would solve their problems. And isn't there a similar tendency today? - for people to look for a therapeutic Messiah, a therapeutic Jesus, who is there to make their lives better.

But Jesus turns them to Psalm 110 to show them that view is way too small. Now, it wasn't that thinking that the Messiah would be David's Son was wrong, it just didn't go far enough. Because this Psalm 110, which David wrote, looks forward to a future, even greater king, and David calls this Messianic King, 'my Lord': Psalm 110:1, "The Lord says to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." But in a patriarchal society, the younger always honours the older. So, if the Messiah is David's son, shouldn't he be calling David 'Lord'? So how could it be that David is bowing down before the One who is his Son?

Well, of course, it all makes sense if that Messianic King had existed for all eternity past, if He was living and reigning before David was a twinkle in his mother's eye; so that when He came He wouldn't only be son of David, but Son of God as well. And that is who Jesus is saying He is. And if you see that, then you realize, as David realized, that this Messiah is not someone who's just come to solve your problems, He's come as your Lord. The one to whom we must bow.

But if the question 'who is Jesus?' is the one that really matters. There are two other questons in this whole exchange that also need answering. You see, Psalm 110 says that God will make all this Messiah's enemies His footstool – but if death is the ultimate enemy, the last enemy, how will Jesus – if He is the Messiah - conquer and bring death under His feet? How can He make death his footstool? And secondly, did you notice in v34-5 that Jesus said it is 'those who are considered worthy' who will be resurrected to life on the last day? And that should have set alarm bells ringing: 'what, you mean some will be counted *un*worthy? That some won't be resurrected to life, but as the Bible tells us elsewhere to eternal destruction?' But if God knows what my heart and my life are really like, if He knows me better than myself, how can I ever hope to be counted worthy?'

Well, those two questions: how will Jesus conquer the last enemy death, and how on earth could you or I ever be counted worthy of resurrection, both find their answer in who Jesus is.

You see, Psalm 110 that Jesus quotes, doesn't only talk of the Messiah being king and Lord, it also says He's a priest: Psalm 110:4, 'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."' Not a priest descended from Aaron or Zadok, not another Sadducee living for his

own gain, but a priest modeled after Melchizedek. And if you don't know who Melchizedek was, you can read about him in Genesis 14. He was King of Jerusalem at the time of Abraham, and Priest of God Most High, - so he was King and priest - and when Abraham returned from battle, Melchizedek blessed him and gave him bread and wine.

And Jesus is standing in the Temple before these aristocratic priests, the Sadducees, as that ultimate King and Priest. And as priest He isn't going to offer more animal sacrifices, this Priest will offer Himself. And just as Melchizedek gave bread and wine to Abraham, at the Last Supper Jesus took bread and wine and said 'this is my body broken for you, this is my blood shed for you'.

And it is through His death and resurrection that you and I can be counted worthy. Because, let's face it –we don't stand a hope on our own! We could never make the grade. But because He has made the grade, because He lived the life you should have lived, and died the death you deserve to die, because He was your substitute, if you'll put your trust in Him – and not yourself – then you'll be counted worthy, because He is worthy. Not because of anything you or I have done but because of what Jesus, Son of David, Lord, King and High Priest has done.

And it was by dying the death that we deserve to die, and by God raising Him from the dead and vindicating Him, that Jesus has broken the chains of death forever. In the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 1:10, Jesus has 'abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.' May God make us a people who live in the joy and the truth and all the glorious implications of that.