

“Insincere Questioning”

Luke 20:27-40

November 11th, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Much had happened in the life of Jesus before this conversation with the Sadducees. Here Jesus was in Jerusalem and He had already caused commotion in the temple by driving out the merchants. Two questions had already been put to Him: the source of His authority and the matter of paying taxes to Caesar.

It is also important to keep in mind that the question posed about the resurrection did not come from bereaved persons seeking hope in the afterlife. Instead, Jesus was being interrogated by persons who had already fixed their belief that there was no resurrection of the dead.

The **Sadducees** were one of the several religious groups within Judaism then. They were of the priestly class, many of whom were wealthy and they were politically and theologically conservative. The Sadducees considered only the first five books of Moses to be authoritative.

The **Pharisees**, on the other hand, believed in all of what we call The Old Testament writings as well as the oral traditions of interpretations of the rabbis. It was the oral tradition that was the basis for the Pharisees’ belief in a resurrection and an afterlife.¹

The **Sadducees** sometimes bated their opponents with impossible “what if” questions and this was the game they were playing here with Jesus. Any of you who have been a target for religious questions, raised by people who have no intention of being influenced by the answers, can recall the frustration of a no-win situation.

The Sadducees viewed the notion of an afterlife as crass and worthy of ridicule. After all, conjugal rights for a menagerie of eight provide a strain on the liveliest of imaginations and people have been having fun with the notion of an afterlife with an “ex” ever since. Some of you

¹ Largely because the Old Testament writings had not developed a theology or imagery of life after death, beyond the shadowy noperon’s land after death that they referred to as Sheol or Abraham’s bosom.

may recall the old Herman’s Hermits song “I’m Henry the Eighth.”



We’ve occasionally been amused by films like “Heaven can Wait,” “Justify Your Life” and others which have speculated about the afterlife. But any speculation about metaphysics or life-beyond-life illustrates the very nature of myth: myth always means more than what anyone can comprehend.² Trying to seriously read the conditions of our present time and space framework into the unknown future is nave and futile. It may even be embarrassing.

In heaven, will infants remain as infants? Will the aged still be aged? Will we recognize people we had known all our life? Will we miss the people who are not there?

What happens in the interval between death and resurrection? Will there be room in heaven for some two billion candidates every thirty years or

so, to say nothing of all the arrivals since Adam and Eve? In any case, how do you suppose we are going to spend eternity when so many of us seem unable to spend our leisure time profitably without becoming bored?



We seem forever bent on reducing the unknown into the familiar terms of our own experiences. And some of religion’s attempts to clarify the supernatural have been an abysmal waste of both the brains and the energy, that might, otherwise, been much more profitably devoted to the

² Be careful that you don’t confuse the word “myth” with the popular street-language of the word that is used to speak of falsehoods or untruths. Myth, in the literary sense, mean “a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief. It is distinguished from symbolic behavior (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (temples, icons). Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in the extraordinary.” (Britannica.com)

improvement of life as it now is. So Jesus' brisk reply to the Sadducee scoffers had its merit.

His point was that a God of life was not a God of bones and ashes. Pointing the inappropriateness of their question, given the fundamental difference between life in this age and in the age to come.

Marriage is appropriate for this age since our mortality necessitates a means for perpetuating life. However, those who are resurrected from the dead as children of God are assumed to be like "the angels." The next life is not encumbered by the legalities and judicial paperwork that human injustice necessitates in this life. One world at a time is enough.

So Jesus was reminding the Sadducees, and all who are like them, that there is another existence that operates on different terms than we now know. Just as the law of death is broken, how much more, then, the law of marrying and giving in marriage and other orders of this earth will be replaced by a better existence.



The second part of Jesus' reply is a response in kind. The Sadducees, in keeping with their belief in only the Pentateuch (or the first five books of the Bible), based their question on Deuteronomy 25 about the levirate law of marriage.

This law, as you may recall, spelled out the duty of a man to marry his deceased brother's wife in order to care for her and enable her to have children (who will care for her in her aging). Jesus appeals to the same body of Scripture, Exodus 3, to affirm that God is the God of the living and the dead. The inference is that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have a continuous life with God and there is nothing about intermediate states of the deceased that is stated or implied.³ As Jesus said later to the thief on the cross next to Him, "Today you will be with Me in paradise."

³ Exodus 3:6 "He (God) said further, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."

So it is important for Luke's theology that Jesus' teaching on the resurrection is consistent with Judaism and understood by those in the major tradition of the Pharisees (who believed in the resurrection of God's people). It is also important for Luke and his church in the 8th decade of the first century and for us that Jesus affirms the resurrection from the dead.



Curiously those who formed the early theology of the 2nd through 4th century Church did a strange thing with this passage. They translated the verb in verse 35 about "those being judged as worthy" to imply that Jesus was saying something about people who are celibate. They interpreted it to teach that those who abstain from sex and marriage in this age will be, in some special way, "sons of the resurrection." The celibate preference in the monastic mentality, to which Jerome contributed so heavily in the West, seems to have influenced his translation in the Latin Vulgate Bible.

But all that Luke seems to be saying is that we can expect the conditions of the next age to be quite different from those of the present, . . . "equal to angels" is likely the closest in accuracy of translating the Greek.



But I would like to get in a time machine and go back and say a few more words to those Sadducees. I would like to show them a VCR, put a stereo "Walkman" over their ears and show them a laser scalpel used to treat cancer and cure cataract blindness. I would like to show them the gas chambers in Auschwitz Germany which were used to murder 6 million people. I'd like to have them talk to people who have been declared clinically dead but who have been resuscitated and have stories about existence in another dimension that they can barely describe for lack of adequate words.

I would like to move them up to their final years of life and ask them if they really believe that all their hard-fought debates about theology and the next life have amounted to much more than a hill of beans. I would like to ask them what,

if anything constructive, has happened in the lives of those they have turned away because they did not believe the same theology as they.

I would like to bring them forward to my life and walk them down the street and into a few homes to show them some of my experiences of seeing the depth of pain in people's lives. I would



like to remind them that they have probably seen as much or more human suffering than I have but then ask them what their arguments over theology and overt posturing as “those

in the right” have practically

done to alleviate any of the human suffering that they have encountered in their brief lifespan.

I would like to tell them about the clergy, in our time, who are consuming most of their energy trying to get people “saved” and the life preserver of religious experience and rhetoric around them while they are ignoring the cruise conditions of the ship of life we are now on. I would like to get those Sadducees to remember the pain of loneliness and rejection that heavily resides within a person who has gone through the grief and searing emotional pain in their marital relationships. I would like to know how they would have counseled, in their office, the woman they so laughingly used in their taunt of Jesus. I'd quietly ask them if they would have asked that question if it had been their sister or daughter who had experienced that tragedy.



There is always going to be a tension between what is now and what is yet to come. Our Christian faith exists in the tension between what is and what we think should be. Through our years, we all walk a tightrope, trying to balance and rebalance our concepts of who we are, Who God is and what we are to be doing with our life in relationship with others. We have more than enough work for ourselves in trying to figure out what to do in this life. That is why studies about things to come⁴ are interesting

⁴ eschatology

about which to speculate but are not things that are truly relevant to how we are supposed to treat our neighbors. Once we believe in the eternity of our God and God's love for us and our assurance of never losing God's love, what deserves our most focused attention is the here and now.



Our culture bombards us with more information than we can handle. We are so deluged by information today that many want someone else to make the decisions, . . . to think for them. Many are

television addicts because television thinks for you, provides the images and most of the time decides what we should think. That is why we can not remember much of what we have just viewed on television: our mind was not being engaged to work on its own. We are often so overloaded with information that we want someone else to provide THE answer for us, and this is particularly true of religion.

The fundamentalist authoritarian churches are packing them in because here, in society, are ministers “who tell it like it is.” They appear to be clear and decisive on the moral issues as if all issues are clearly discernible and easy. There, you can go to church and know that somebody sounds like they know what they are talking about on every single issue – even on those which cause the greatest minds in society to struggle. These are the leaders who quickly accuse those differing with them with not being as serious about biblical scholarship or reverence as they. You hear the disdain in the tone of their voice that suggests that those who disagree with them have lost their minds or sold their souls to the devil.

Watch out for those people who have the answers coming quickly with no sense of struggle, research or reflection. Watch out for the present day Sadducees who claim they can pin point the signs of the end times about which the Bible allegedly forecasts. Watch out for those who have their energies heavenward but who can not turn their attentions to the pain of life now – the struggles for growth and change, the beauty and

delight of true creativity that emerges from the struggle to rise above conflict.



You know what people truly want and need? They don't want you to spell out the particularities of heaven. They want you to help them make it through the week.

They want you to affirm that they are not so bad after all. They want to hear of their personal worth and dignity in this increasingly impersonal world. They want some help in believing that right now, they have some God-given beauty within them and that their true colors are, after all, beautiful. And they should be hearing this encouragement from the Church and not just Cyndi Lauper.

You with the sad eyes,
don't be discouraged,
Oh I realize it's hard to take courage.
In a world full of people,
You can lose sight of it all.
And the darkness inside you,
makes you feel so small.

Show me a smile, then,
don't be unhappy,
can't remember when I last saw you
laughin'.
If this world makes you crazy
and you're taken all you can bear,
then you call me up
because you know I'll be there.

But I see your true colors shining through.
I see your true colors,
and that's why [God] loves you.
So don't be afraid to let them show,
your true colors,
your true are beautiful
like a rainbow.⁵ 🌈



⁵ Verse and chorus repeat. This is by the recording artist Cyndi Lauper "True Colors" released 1986 on the album by the same name, written by Tom Kelly and Billy Steinberg.