

ASC Sermon November 10, 2013 G. G. West

We frequently say and believe that the asking of questions is a good thing. Young children are always asking questions because they actually are curious about the world around them. And we like to think that there are no dumb questions. However, as we get older there are questions that should not be asked because the purpose of the question is to change the topic about what is being taught or to try and trick the person to whom the question is asked; they are questions which try to make a person look stupid or foolish.

I think that this is the type of question we see in today's Gospel. Perhaps it is not as simple as that because we possibly do not know that much about the background of the Sadducees who are asking the question.

We must not think that all Jews at the time of Jesus believed as the Sadducees did. There were probably as many Jewish sects as we today have Christian denominations. Jesus had already taken on the Pharisees and scribes who were more liberal in thinking. So it is no surprise that the Sadducees would take on the Jesus, the new prophet in town.

The Sadducees were a conservative and usually wealthy group of very devout Jews who only counted the books of Moses to give them direction in their lives. That means that they only believed in the in the first five books of the Old Testament. All the remaining books of the Old Testament including the writings of the prophets were deemed to be heretical to them. And so it would not be a surprise that much of the teaching of Jesus would be discounted. So when Jesus spoke

of loving enemies or paying taxes to the hated Romans they rejected these ideas.

And they also rejected much of what Jesus did. They found his actions to be violations of the law and to them Jesus was in error when he associated with tax collectors, social outcasts, and gentiles. Of course his disciples were painted with the very same brush. They knew what their position was and they did not care what Jesus might say but they thought they might score points if they could trip him up.

Such a limited view of the world which had developed in Israel made the Sadducees seem to be very pessimistic and joyless. They did not believe in the hope of resurrection which was a concept which had developed two hundred years before the time of Christ. So for them when a

person died their soul went to Sheol, a place deep in the earth, where at best you had a very diminished kind of life.

So when Jesus preached of the kingdom of God which was eternal, and would be a new life for the faithful with a great banquet and where wrongs suffered would be made right, the Sadducees thought he was crazy and their question was intended to make Jesus look foolish.

The Torah did quote Moses as saying that if a man's brother died, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise children with her. It was not necessary for them to go through the procedure six more times but they did for effect.

In that paternalistic society, a woman was dependent on her husband or her sons for her support. She was not permitted to own property or inherit from her husband.

So after the woman was married and childless seven times she dies. My guess is that she would be exhausted!!!

But here is the question which is an attempt to trick Jesus: if there is a resurrection and if God's kingdom is so joyous and everlasting when she enters this kingdom, whose wife will she be? After all, she has been the wife of all seven brothers.

Jesus responds in a manner which gives us a hint of what life in the eternal kingdom will be like without denying what her life in this world was.

“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age... neither marry or are given in marriage, Indeed, they cannot die anymore...for they are children of God.”

Clearly Jesus is telling us that we cannot project the values and structures that we hold in our mortal life here on earth even those that God has established for us. These are sacred expressions of his love for human life but not so in the future life that God has in store for us. Yes, God has ordained that marriage is a sacred bond between two people that they might love and care for one another, support one another and perhaps provide an environment for the raising of children. And as intimate as this relationship might be, it does not last forever. The marriage vows that we take end when death parts us. In marriage we learn to

forgive and be forgiven, to nurture and be nurtured, to grow in faith and trust. But when death parts us or in our society when marriages end before death, we are free to marry again.

Marriage is finite and it belongs to this life here on earth. The new life is not an extension of life as we know it: it is not resuscitation but a resurrection. When we enter God's kingdom, we have no need for marriage for then we will all be children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. We will not need the earthly institutions which provided support and security because we will be in the very presence of God. I doubt the wife in the story would want to tolerate any more marriages.

Jesus turns the tables on the Sadducees by quoting a passage from the Torah which they did trust. Jesus recalls that when God confronted Moses in the burning bush, centuries after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the forefathers of the faith who had died—calling him to go to Egypt to free the Jews from the bondage of slavery, God still claimed to be their God, in the present tense. As a result, Jesus concludes, “God is the God of the living, not of the dead, for to him all of them are alive.”

Jesus tells us that the Sadducees whether ancient or modern are wrong. The resurrection is a new life—it is something different and not a small life but a life that grows larger. It is better than this life.

The next verse in Luke's Gospel which we did not read is "Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." For they no longer dared to ask him another question."

Amen.