

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 70”
Matthew 22:23-33

One of the many tools in the repertoire of the political – and other – reporter is the “*What if ...?*” question. When a new policy is launched or a new initiative announced, the likes of John Humphrys or Jeremy Paxman or James Naughtie will leap on some relatively insignificant aspect of it and ask what would happen if such and such were to occur: how then would the policy or the initiative be able to cope? We see it probably in its most advanced and scary form in newspapers like the *Daily Mail*, for which everything that happens, pretty well, could potentially cause cancer or house price inflation or a takeover of our green and pleasant land by whoever are considered to be the bogeymen of the moment. Or, for the sake of balance, in the *Guardian* where the same events will lead to the revival of fascism, further repression of free speech or the real possibility of being governed by swivel-eyed lunatics who actually believe in God. It’s all completely hypothetical, of course, but that doesn’t seem to stop them.

Anyway, here we have the Sadducees in similar mode. In the second of the three confrontations which Matthew records as taking place with the leaders of the people in the Temple during the last week of Jesus’ life, these Sadducees come up to Jesus with a cracker of a hypothetical question to try and show up how ridiculous is Jesus’ apparent belief in the resurrection. We’ve come across these people a couple of times before in Matthew’s gospel, but each time in association with the Pharisees (in fact, apart from those couple of appearances in this account of Matthew’s, the Sadducees are mentioned only once by Mark, once by Luke and not at all by John). They are people who usually operate in conjunction with the Pharisees and other figures of the religious establishment. Here they’re out on a bit of a limb, because one of the things that sets them apart from the Pharisees is the fact that they don’t believe in the resurrection (that’s why, as they used to say in Sunday School, they’re “sad, you see”).

These Sadducees were the priestly aristocracy amongst the Jews, and had been from the time of Alexander the Great. They largely controlled the political life of the people – much like mediaeval bishops or Renaissance popes. After the Romans took over sixty odd years before Jesus was born, they tried to live in close contact with them to promote the secular life of the Jews. As a result of that, they didn’t take a great deal of interest in religious matters and so put themselves at odds with the Pharisees, especially as far as the “traditions of the elders” went. For the Pharisees, as we’ve seen in earlier parts of this gospel, religious life was pretty intricate due to all the extra things that had been added to the Law of Moses.

For these Sadducees, though, anything not explicitly taught by the Torah was rejected as a forbidden innovation (there’s a few Christians like that lurking about in most churches, too!). So they were, if you like, very conservative and very formal in their religion. There was no development or innovation in their

practice or doctrine. We might think of them as perhaps the very traditional members of the Church of England, who want to stick to the old ways of doing things and see that as an indispensable part of being British and a way into the Establishment. That partly explains their opposition to the idea of resurrection. It wasn't explicitly taught in the Law of Moses – at least, by their interpretation – so, therefore, it didn't exist. This is what the great Jewish historian Josephus has to say about them:

“But the Sadducees ... take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men's own choice, and that the one or the other belongs so to everyone, that they may act as they please. They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades. Moreover, the Pharisees are friendly to one another, and are for the exercise of concord, and regard for the public; but the behaviour of the Sadducees one towards another is in some degree wild, and their conversation with those that are of their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them.” (Josephus: War II,8,14)

“But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins them” (Josephus: Antiquities XVIII,1,4)

By the time of Jesus' ministry, the influence of the Sadducees had greatly declined and they were not very popular compared with the fiercely nationalistic Pharisees.

Anyway, these people see an opportunity to, as they think, make Jesus look stupid. They know that he has been talking about a Kingdom, the sovereign rule of God. Jesus has been showing by his own actions and explaining in his teaching and debating that this is all about the restoration of God's creation as he originally intended it – and that includes the idea that men and women will be able to live and work within that restored order, which must of necessity involve resurrection. So they take that one idea and try to use it to show up how wrong he is. It's a bit like debaters today who latch on to one aspect of a person's belief or teaching and try to use that to make the whole thing look stupid.

Maybe this attempt to ridicule the belief and teaching of Jesus was a means of trying to restore some of their kudos. It was based very much on their reading of their Scriptures and Jesus shows up very clearly that they haven't really got the first idea of what it's all about. In fact, he twice tells them here that they have got it all wrong (vv29,31). They haven't even begun to grasp the concept of the resurrection and so their linking of it to this particular issue of “levirate marriage” is a great mistake.

Basically, what they are asking is based on the Law set out in *Deuteronomy 25:5,6*. There's an actual example of it in *Genesis 38:8-10* in the story of the infamous Onan (Dorothy Parker's budgie). If a man died leaving no offspring, then it was the duty of his brother to marry the widow and thus ensure that the family name was preserved and the widow was not left vulnerable. It's a rather scary prospect, isn't it? Especially if you now have visions of your sister-in-law or brother-in-law drifting into your imagination! OK, say the Sadducees, if a particularly unfortunate woman manages to get through seven of her

brothers-in-law (it sounds a bit like *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, doesn't it?), when the resurrection comes, who's her proper husband? After all, they'll all be there, but she can't be married to them all at once, can she?

It doesn't take Jesus long to blow their thinking right out of the water. The main point is a logical one. No-one who undergoes the resurrection is going to die: in that sense they will be like the angels. So there's not a lot of point in keeping to this law, or indeed to marriage at all. The main point of marriage is the reproduction of the species. The reason for the law is to ensure that the woman is able to bear children. But we'll all be immortal and so in that sense marriage will be quite unnecessary. And, as C S Lewis (amongst others) said, even the amazing pleasure of sex will pale into insignificance compared to the joy of sharing in the glory of God.

And what's more, the resurrection isn't just a kind of waking up from sleep and getting on with everything as we have done before death. It will be of an entirely different order, as we are often saying. Those who have died and been resurrected are no longer dead. Yes, they've died, but they have been made alive in Christ. As Jesus says here, "*He is not the God of the dead but of the living.*" And his argument for that is based on the Scriptures from which the Sadducees are trying to make their point. It's perhaps a bit difficult for us to appreciate exactly what he is saying here, but it's based on the idea that it would be quite unworthy of God to be described as the God of the dead. It's an argument that is used in various places in the Old Testament – one example is in *Psalms 30:8-10*.

Jesus takes them back to the call of Moses (*Exodus 3:6* in our Bibles), which would have been very familiar to them, and attaches the fullest possible meaning to what God has to say to Moses from the burning bush. The argument goes something like this. If, in the time of Moses, when Abraham was long since physically dead, God can say that he is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, then there must still be an Abraham for him to be God of. As we've said, the Jews could not possibly think of him as the God of the dead – what's the point of being God of that? A man with whom the living God can have a living relationship must somehow be alive himself, even though he might physically have died. In other words, Abraham (and Isaac and Jacob) must have been resurrected in order to continue enjoying that relationship with God. God's covenant relationship is everlasting and it is personal.

To put it another way, the most important reason why those who are considered worthy continue to live after their physical death and will one day arise in perfection is that the chief object of human existence (as so many of our creeds and confessions tell us) is to live for God and to his honour - "*to worship God and enjoy him for ever*". How could this be achieved if the faithful die for ever after such a brief span of human life? God calls us into everlasting relationship with him, so it must continue after this life, which

is anything but everlasting (although it may seem that way sometimes when you're waiting in the queue at the Post Office on pension day!).

And another aspect of this is also to do with that kind of political aspect of the life of the Kingdom of God and its opposition to the power of the Empire which we mentioned last time, when we were looking at the question of paying taxes to Caesar. One of the ways in which empires – even today – hold sway over people is through their use of the fear of death. That's very often the ultimate threat. If you owe your allegiance to an empire – the Kingdom of God – in which there is no prospect of losing your life – rather there's the promise of enjoying an even more fulfilled and abundant life – then there's nothing that can really threaten you any longer.

Some of the people listening congratulate Jesus on his answer, probably because he had bested their theological rivals. But after that no-one dares get into a debate with Jesus any more because he has just shown in a very short space of time that he can demolish anyone's questions and those who try to ridicule him end up looking very ridiculous themselves.

This, then, is an example of how **not** to use the Bible. It's not, as the Sadducees are trying to use it, a collection of odd proof texts that can be marshalled to make one's point. So many Christians have this habit of backing up what they say with some obscure text (usually from the Minor Prophets or the difficult bits of *Revelation* – the kind of people who feel they have to do so often have an apocalyptic bent!) and think that that then settles any argument. This query from the Sadducees has a biblical basis, but it receives a very sharp rebuke from Jesus (v29).

Their religion is full of half-baked notions of what the Bible says. But Jesus says that it's no use quoting the Bible like this when you obviously haven't studied what it really says. It is unbiblical religion, and a religion which sits so loose to the overall message of Scripture is an affront to God and a very dangerous way to try and communicate the faith. Don't take verses and passages out of context. Don't try to find bits that simply reinforce your own prejudices. And above all, don't use the Bible to try and make ridiculous points. (e.g. *Jesus Loved Martha: The Housewife's Contacts with Jesus* by George Sinker.)

But there's also a far more positive and encouraging message here for the people of God. The new age, the post-resurrection existence, is well worth looking forward to. It will mean the continuation of our relationship with God: indeed, it will mean the deepening and the culmination of that relationship with him. We may become very attached to things – and to people – in this age. There's a wonderful song by Sammy Horner and the Electrics called *Leave This World Behind* which contains these lines: "*They say there's something better in the world to come, but the thought of leaving this one leaves me kind of numb;*

'cause I like it here just fine, and I think I'm going to miss you when I leave this world behind.' We probably all think like that a lot of the time: we've become very fond of our families, our friends, our environments. But the good news is that the next age is going to be even better. In fact, it will be of such a different order, such an amazingly different experience that we won't even have a second thought about this one. We will be for ever in God's presence, able to worship him ceaselessly and to receive from him ceaselessly all that he has for us. This life has its hassles – especially if you've got through seven husbands and ended up running out of brothers! – but there is so much to look forward to in the future. Indeed, as in the title of another song (and album) by *The Electrics*, we'll be *"living it up when we die"*. It's in the interests of each of us to ensure that we are among those who will be participating in it. We cannot ever make ourselves worthy, but we can put all our trust and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who himself has been through death and shown us what resurrection is like, and through him be made worthy of enjoying a relationship with God for ever more. And as we live out the rest of this life here, let's be thankful that we worship the God of the living, not of the dead.

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Questions for discussion

1. In what ways do we often behave like the Sadducees are doing here?
2. If all Scripture is inspired by God, what's wrong with using odd texts as ammunition in our arguments?
3. How do you think of life after death?
4. Why do you think we so rarely reflect on what eternity with God will be like? Would it make a difference to us if we thought about it more frequently? Why/why not?
5. What is the main thing you have learned from this passage?