

10 November 2019 – 3rd before Advent

Job 19:23-27a; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

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Resurrection is weird.

Resurrection means that you die and then come back to life, right? Well, that creates all kinds of logical issues, like the one the Sadducees pose to Jesus this morning. If a woman has been legally married to seven men in this life, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? It's a question in the same genre as "can God create a rock so heavy He can't move it", intentionally missing the point, but it's not *wrong*; they do know what they're talking about, as far as the law is concerned.

So Jesus doesn't come back with a superior legal argument. He says no, you've made a category error: this legal house of cards you've built up has no relevance in the resurrection. It will die with you and be superseded by a new order where there is no such thing as marriage. Or death.

And they don't dare to ask him any more questions. Perhaps because he's refused to engage on their terms, and that's no fun. But perhaps also because the more you think about this saying, the weirder it becomes. Marriage and death are both pretty important in our earthly lives, so clearly resurrection doesn't mean coming *back* to life; there's no "back" about it, and that can be very hard to contemplate.

For one thing, it's sobering to be reminded that whatever we're good at, whatever we understand, whatever makes us feel in control, is irrelevant in the face of God and the resurrection. For these Sadducees, it's knowledge of the law. For us, maybe it's academic success, or musical talent; or a job title, or membership in a community; or even diligence in prayer, or skill in helping others. These are all perishable things. If we pin our identity and our pride on them, we risk missing God standing right in front of us, calling us into a greater inheritance (which He does, even when we ask irrelevant questions, which is most of the time). This means we have to hold our talents and works and accomplishments and even our understanding lightly, because it's all temporary.

So far, so good. This sounds a lot like laying aside pride and self-will for humility and obedience to God, which is familiar, if not simple or easy. But there's something deeper and more disturbing about what Jesus says here. There is no marriage in the resurrection. Of course, this hypothetical woman, who's been legally coerced into seven marriages that each end in tragedy, might be relieved to hear this. But for someone in a happy marriage, or any kind of loving relationship, how can this be good news?

In our collect at Compline on Sundays, we ask God to bring us at our last awakening into the house of heaven where there is "no darkness nor dazzling but one equal light; no noise nor silence but one equal music; no fears nor hopes but one equal eternity". Perhaps we can add: no marriage nor singleness, no community nor loneliness, but one equal love.

Infinite love, without limit or end, having no husbands or wives, parents or children, sisters or brothers or friends, because the love of God encompasses and surpasses all of the ways we love each other now. Our relationships, just like our skills and accomplishments, are only temporary distinctions.

That sounds more like good news. It's also very confusing. How can there be light without darkness or love without separation? How can anything exist and never not exist? Meaning itself starts to break down.

Well, we're mortal, finite, and finite things can never approach or comprehend infinity. But in the beginning, we were made for eternal life; so God became finite, that we might become infinite. What will we be without death? A different kind of creature entirely: not just vindicated or healed or perfected, but **changed**. And of *course* when we try to pin down that state of immortality with the finite language and systems that we understand (like marriage laws), Jesus can only respond, with infinite patience, that we're missing the point. "They cannot die anymore". Immortality, eternity, infinity, changes *everything*.

If we start listing all the whole numbers, 1,2,3,4, and so on, no matter how far we get, we'll always have infinitely more to go. In mathematics, this is called **countable infinity**, because it's an infinity we can start counting, writing down, one thing after another, in a tidy and ordered way. We can name any whole number, no matter how large, and be sure that we would eventually count it in our list. We can even start counting all the fractions that exist; there's a clever two-dimensional way to list them without leaving any out.

Now take a number like pi, 3.1415926...etc., etc.: it goes on forever, and never repeats, and can't be written as a fraction. Say we wanted to list all the numbers like that. Well, it turns out we can't even start. There's no way to order them that makes any sense, no way to list them that won't miss one even if our list is infinitely long. This is **uncountable** infinity, somehow even more infinite, defying not just limits but order itself. And what's worse, there's yet another kind of infinity above uncountable infinity, and another, and another, and you guessed it, that process goes on to infinity too.

The point here is that life in God, "world without end", can't be something tidy and comprehensible, even a tidy and comprehensible state that carries on forever. If numbers are so much more complex than that, how much must God be? And Jesus wants to bring us into *that* unfathomable eternity. Infinite light, infinite peace, infinite glory, without limit, beyond description or thought.

It would seem much more sensible and humble to ask for riches or power or trees being uprooted and planted in the sea, but we are called to eternal life; as Paul says, "to obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ". We're not allowed to accept anything less, which is very audacious - and also very demanding.

We are Easter people, resurrection people, and that means keeping our eyes fixed on something greater than ourselves.

It means recognizing that our good works and love for one another matter a great deal, but they can never become ends in themselves, idols, because all their value comes from the infinitely greater love of God.

It means willingness to be **changed** into something we can't predict or control or understand; not only after death but also tomorrow and the next day, and every day for the rest of our lives.

It means following Jesus even into death and emptiness, trusting that He knows the way through and *is* the way through. We know that our Redeemer lives, and has gone before us into eternity, to call us into a life greater than we can ask or imagine.