

# *resurrection is god creating*

a sermon preached on the

*twenty-fifth sunday after pentecost*

6 November 2016

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Job 19:23-27a, Psalm 17:1-9, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-17, Luke 20:27-38

“Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question...”<sup>1</sup>

Firstly, we note that this is not a genuine ‘question’. It is in fact a malevolent attack.<sup>2</sup> The lectionary has brought us to the final days of Jesus’ life. Jesus’ opponents are out to trap him, using any pretext with which to condemn him.<sup>3</sup> The true nature of the religious powerbrokers is being revealed. And Jesus is modelling for his disciples precisely what he is sending them out to be: lamb in the midst of wolves.<sup>4</sup>

Even so, though it’s not a genuine question, and though these are merely the power games of doctrine choppers, the theme of the question is crucial in Jesus’ teaching. So let us reflect upon the matter of ‘resurrection’.

Unlike the Pharisees, we are told, the Sadducees didn’t believe in resurrection. When we consider their line of questioning – “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?”<sup>5</sup> and their story of that poor woman having to endure all those brothers forced upon her! – they reveal that their thinking is concrete, and literal.

As a religious-political group in ancient Israel the Sadducees disappeared from the scene. However the Sadducee concrete-literal mind remains alive, even now. In what I hear so often at funerals, the Sadducee picture of resurrection remains very common – expressed in the hope for family reunions, of husbands and wives, parents and children, in some distant ‘heaven’ in the clouds.

However comforting this concrete-literal scene may appear to be, Jesus declares it to be entirely wrong: “Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage”.<sup>6</sup>

And in spite of how Paul has been distorted by some of his concrete-minded followers, his teaching on the matter is equally explicit: “But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”<sup>7</sup> The Jerusalem Bible’s translation of Paul’s assessment of these questions is even more blunt: “They are stupid questions”.

They are ‘stupid questions’ because it’s not possible to understand resurrection in a concrete manner; the woman will not be married to anyone in the resurrection! There won’t be ‘marriage’ as we know it. And they are stupid questions because resurrection does not merely describe a situation following our final breath; God is not God of the dead, but of the living.<sup>8</sup>

Today’s gospel exposes, then, these two spiritual dead ends: concrete-literal mindedness; and otherworldliness. Regarding otherworldliness, it has been noted that, “Resurrection... has invariably been described as belonging to another time and place”.<sup>9</sup> This has the effect of removing resurrection from the present reality, into a kind of fairy-tale never-never land. Thus, “when robbed of its impact on the present... that is why for the majority of

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1 Luke 20:27

2 Luke 20:1-26

3 Luke 20:20

4 Luke 10:3

5 Luke 20:33

6 Luke 20:35

7 1 Corinthians 15:35-36

8 Luke 20:38

9 Harry Williams, **True Resurrection**, London: Mitchell Beazley, 1972, p4.

people it means nothing”. Our mission is rendered meaningless when resurrection is robbed of its impact on the present.

In order to avoid this dead-end, it’s necessary to remember that the doctrine of Resurrection is a function of the doctrine of Incarnation. In the light of Incarnation we see that ‘resurrection life’ is not *back there*, not merely historical; it’s not *out there*, not mere supernaturalism; nor *up there*, not life in a different reality. Therefore, resurrection has nothing to do with family reunions in the clouds. “God is God not of the dead, but of the living”.

So resurrection is a *present* reality, realised within the human soul, here and now. The human soul is the living, present-tense crucible of resurrection life.

And the good news is that this is the universal human vocation, without distinction. All humankind is called to embody this Divine-human reality, a resurrection life which is here and now. Moreover, none of the powers which we fear are capable, ultimately, of thwarting resurrection.<sup>10</sup>

In this light, resurrection is the Divine charge to humankind to grow up – to become divinised. This means repenting of the regressive forces which would hold us in an infantile state. For all historicising, externalising, and future-projection is abdication of responsibility for living in the present, avoidance of taking full responsibility for incarnating the Divine life.

Yes, it is understandable that we fear the full implications of Incarnation, and thus project resurrection back there, out there, up there, and prefer someone else to do it for us. It is, after all, a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, resurrection life may only be entered by a narrow way: “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able”.<sup>12</sup> Even so, the disciple’s task is to go where the Master has gone. The price of evolutionary development, salvation, consciousness, is nothing less than taking up our own cross,<sup>13</sup> being a sheep among wolves.

The call of the gospel is to grow up, to become conscious, to become truly liberated from the limitations of ‘only partly living’.<sup>14</sup> “For resurrection is *God creating*”.<sup>15</sup> Creating is a present participle; it’s an action in the present. This growing up is costly: “Resurrection comes... unexpectedly, at some moment of unknowing, exile, abandonment”.<sup>16</sup>

At this end of the liturgical year, and at the point in Luke’s story when the moment of unknowing, exile, abandonment is imminent,<sup>17</sup> we are reminded today that the resurrected “cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 8:25, 12:27,32

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 10:31

<sup>12</sup> Luke 13:24

<sup>13</sup> Luke 9:23, 14:27

<sup>14</sup> From T S Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Williams, p181.

<sup>16</sup> Harry Williams, p181.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 21

<sup>18</sup> Luke 20:36