

Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity

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Introduction

In the last few months we have been following Jesus' progress to Jerusalem – a journey marked by escalating tensions as he responds to encounters and questions along the way. The last three Gospel readings in year C come from the final section of Luke's great narrative – his account of what happens when Jesus finally arrives at his destination and all these tensions come to a head; and so we finally reach the end game...

Against this dramatic background, the ostensive subject matter of the question posed in today's passage appears to be peculiarly arcane and of limited wider applicability; moreover the question is not even a genuine appeal for a better understanding but an attempt to trap and compromise Jesus and thus undermine the authority of his teaching. However despite this duplicity there is a genuine issue at stake; and the way in which Jesus brings out and responds to this, while also exposing and answering the faulty understandings and interpretations which inform the Sadducean position, can provide some useful starting points for our thinking about conflict.

Preparation: Revisit some of the earlier encounters in Luke's Gospel which involve questions (either to or from Jesus) and then choose one or two for further reflection. What do you think was the intention of the question/questioner – either overt or hidden? What role did any questions play in how the scene unfolded? What question might you have asked in this scenario?

Text

Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.

Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the

second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but 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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.

And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

Comment

The final section of Luke’s Gospel falls into two main sections: 19:45 –21:38 (marked by an *inclusio* at 19:47 and 21:37) which primarily deals with Jesus’ actions and teachings while in the temple; and 22:1 – 24:53 which covers the events of the Passion. For obvious reasons the lectionary selections can only cover a fragment of this content. However in segueing straight from Jesus’ meeting with Zacchaeus to his joust with the Sadducees, the lectionary reading route omits a raft of significant moments.

In between these two stories, Jesus has finally entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds (19: 20–40), has wept over the city (19: 41–44), caused mayhem at the centre of religious power (19: 45 – 46), begun regularly teaching in the temple with crowds hanging on his words while the authorities plot his downfall and death (19: 47–48), dealt with challenges to his religious authority (20: 1–8) and attempts to trip him up politically (20: 20–26), and told two somewhat inflammatory stories (19: 11– 27; 20: 9–19). So it would be fair to say that tensions are running pretty high! However once again Jesus’ deals with a hostile situation in a way which not only exposes both the tactics and the faulty assumptions and argumentation of his opponents, but also gives pointers about an understanding of importance to Luke’s readers.

The Sadducees were an aristocratic party associated with the temple high priesthood. In contrast to the Pharisees who followed the books of the Pentateuch, the prophets and the psalms, they observed only the written laws of Torah and not the traditions of the elders. Unlike the Pharisees, they rejected the idea of the immortality of the dead and of post-mortem reward and punishment arguing that such a concept was absent from the Pentateuch [1]. In effect this produced very different views of where God’s covenantal promises and justice in the world were enacted and whether or not they could play out beyond the current life of the world. Deliberately posing ‘resurrection riddles’ as a way of tormenting the Pharisees may have been a regular feature of barbed encounters between the two groups [2]. Here the Sadducees try a similar approach as a way of undermining Jesus’ authority. In this instance the trick question concerns an extreme example of levirate marriage (Deut 25: 5–10).

Jesus is not deceived by the question and, rather than addressing their unanswerable riddle, exposes both their faulty understanding of the concept and nature of resurrection and the inaccuracy of their reasoning about its non-existence from what they hold to be foundational scriptures. We don’t know which came first – the failure of imagination about what resurrection might be or the mistaken premise and argument based on the privileged texts, or perhaps they went hand-in-hand. What is clear from Jesus’ response though is that both play a part and both need challenging. The Sadducees’ question about marriage in the afterlife

is (as they well know) ridiculous – not because, as they suppose, it shows that resurrection cannot happen, but because they have totally misunderstood what resurrection entails. Their scenario posits it as a state which is simply contiguous with life *before* death – a state in which the same narratives, conventions and processes continue unchanged. Thus (in this instance) women are still commodities to be deployed for the preservation of the male family line – and such a continuation is still seen as an essential aspect of life. However, as Jesus makes clear, this is a complete misunderstanding since resurrection life will be completely different in its nature and expression from that experienced *ante mortum*.

Having brought out and challenged the faulty understanding at the heart of their concept of what resurrection means, Jesus then turns his attention to their basic argument as to why it does not occur. Appealing to one of the major stories in their key texts – that of Moses' first encounter with God (Ex 3:6) – he demonstrates that they have failed to actually understand its import. Far from the Pentateuch containing nothing to support the idea of resurrection, God's own words to Moses underline a continuing relational connection between humanity and God which is not disrupted by death. And if covenant relationship continues beyond death then all that goes with – justice, blessing etc. – continues likewise. It is easy to see how these might have been particularly important messages for the nascent christian communities who would have been hearing Luke's message.

The lectionary cuts off the last two verses of the section so we don't get to officially hear the response. However, for the record:

Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

It seems the Sadducees were silenced (the approval comes from someone in another group), but whether because they were embarrassed that they had been rumbled, annoyed at having their view challenged, or simply trying to get to grips with a new possibility for thought and action, Luke does not tell us.

[1] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Annotated Jewish New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 2011) pp. 85; 391; 527; 549.

[2] Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002) p. 226–7

Response

There are a number of possible starting places for conflict-related reflection here. You might like to consider some of these with respect to a conflict situation in which you are involved using the questions below or any others which the reflection raises for you:

What different ways have you used questions in a situation of conflict? Have these been helpful or otherwise?

To what extent are you aware of your motives for asking particular questions? Do you think this kind of awareness matters? Why or why not?

In the light of any of your answers, are there ways in which you might consider developing your practice of questioning? How could you do that and who might perhaps help you?

What things influence how you see the possible outcomes to this (or any) conflict? How important are they and why?

Are the ways in which you are visualising the situation ones which could expand the range of possibilities for thinking or acting differently if/when necessary? If not, are there things you could do to help you see different possibilities in a situation? Is there someone who might be able to help you with this? Are there things you could do which might help someone else to see the situation differently?

What justifications do you have for the positions you have adopted in this conflict? Are they ones which you have inherited or adopted or ones you have thought through for yourself? To what extent would you be willing to re-examine them or open them up to challenge from someone else if this might help change the dynamics of a situation? How could you go about this in a safe way?

To what extent are you aware of the narratives and justifications which others are drawing on in the situation? Would understanding these better help in working issues in more constructive ways? How might you go about that?

Prayer

Jesus,
You knew what questions to ask,
and when and how
to ask them,
using them
to challenge
unearth
and illuminate
in the service of nurturing
life.

You knew how to answer questions,
even those asked
with less honest intent,
using them
to challenge
unearth
and illuminate
in the service of deepening
understanding.

Help me to learn
how to ask
and how to answer,
that my questions
and answers
might always reflect
your Kingdom's values
nurture its life
and reveal its joy.

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey