

Pentecost 22
Sermon – Luke 20:27-40

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

It's been a big year. This thought has been going around in my mind for the last couple of weeks, as I have been preparing the annual report and reading all the reports given to me by our various program leaders. We have indeed been through a big year. Our first together, and there have been ups and downs. And even Australia has had a big year with multiple flooding episodes, a federal election, and now we're facing State elections later this month. For my part, I've been challenged by the upheaval in my personal life, which while delightful and happy, has also been most unexpected and something of an adjustment. As a community we have reshaped our Vision and Values to give us a changed focus, a sharper focus.

So how do we approach such times? I'd like to say that I always approach challenges with grace, patience and kindness, but I would be lying! Our Gospel story today is drawn from chapter 20 of Luke and throughout the chapter there is a series of disputes that Jesus has with the religious types of his day: the Priests, the Scribes and the Sadducees. In this chapter, Jesus shows us how to respond in times of challenge. On multiple occasions he is set up to be trapped with tricky, and it could be said, disingenuous questions, but Jesus manages these situations with grace, dignity and integrity. He is indeed an amazing role model, apart from his other qualities. So, I thought it would be good to look at our Gospel reading today, a prime example of one of these disingenuous questions given to Jesus, and marvel at his response, and the great hope of resurrection.

Well, if I thought I'd been under the pump this year, just imagine what it would be like to be Jesus at this particular point in time. Remember, that Luke had set out to write an orderly account, so that we would know the truth about Jesus and his teachings. And in this orderly account, we find ourselves today with Jesus, sandwiched between his triumphal entry into Jerusalem in chapter 19 and his Passion or death which plays out in chapters 22 and 23. We also know that Jesus is very aware of his fate. In chapter 18, he predicts to his disciples, for the third time, his death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

With this knowledge, Jesus is teaching in the temple and is being challenged by the chief priests and scribes, firstly about his authority to teach, then with the question about paying taxes to which he famously replies "Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's, and to God the things that are God's". The third challenge, about resurrection, is our Gospel reading today.

I wonder what it would have been like to respond to this question? The question of whose wife will the hapless, childless, disempowered widow be in the resurrection, seems somewhat ludicrous in today's context. And the complete lack of agency that this woman has, as she is passed from brother to brother, also seems so foreign in 21st century western eyes. I suspect that if the subject of resurrection wasn't such a core part of our Christian faith, Jesus would have considered the question ludicrous as well – perhaps he did! Perhaps the Sadducees thought that here was a "gotcha" question for this rather annoying person who seemed to be challenging their own integrity and authority.

And what about the Sadducees? What does this question say about these religious people, one of the sections within the Jewish faith at the time? Well firstly, they ask their question, in the hope of trapping Jesus, quoting Moses,

on a subject that is very biblically contested. Remember Henry 8th? He sought to divorce his first wife, who was also his brother's widow, quoting another part of scripture saying not to marry your brother's widow. These situations demonstrate the human propensity to pick out individual pieces of scripture to point score, something that still happens regularly today even in our own religious circles. Reading and understanding scripture, I think, needs to be done thoughtfully, particularly with the historical and textual context in mind and in the light of the core messages of the Gospel.

But this question to Jesus also demonstrates a somewhat crass and worldly understanding by the Sadducees when it comes to their faith. As a group who weren't convinced about resurrection, they had hoped to ridicule Jesus with this question of 7 husbands and one wife. Instead, it gave him the opportunity to not only rebut them in a scriptural sense but also to describe the nature of our resurrected life. First, he addresses the nature of resurrection when he says:

“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.”

Our resurrected life is not an extension or repetition of this life, where we might marry, own property, or have fallings out with friends and family! It will be a life of perfect union with God and with each other, where we are “like angels”. This week a facebook friend posted on the anniversary of the death of her father. She said “Four years ago you got your angel’s wings.” Because I had been contemplating this text, I marveled at the power of so many of

Jesus' metaphors to cross into our modern conversation. And I also marveled at how articulate and calm Jesus was in the intense and problematic situation he found himself in.

And Jesus isn't done yet! Quoting Moses back at the Sadducees, he refutes their lack of belief in the resurrection by saying:

"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."

This description of God in relationship with three Jewish patriarchs, long gone from their earthly existence, implies the ongoing life of those with whom God remains in relationship with. The relationship that God seeks with humanity, with us, here and now, transcends our mortal life, transcends our death. God is God of the living.

And it seems to satisfy at least some of the scribes, who say at the end of the reading "Teacher, you have spoken well." Throughout his ministry, Jesus' grasp of scripture gives him authority and enables him to counteract the challenges regularly put out by the religious authorities of his day.

So, what do we do with this message in times of change and challenge? I think the answer is in two words: relationship and hope. We need to be in relationship with God and with each other, just as we often say, quoting Jesus, at the beginning of our weekly service:

'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' Jesus said: 'This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your

neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

I love saying this at the beginning of our service and not just because of the focus on relationship with God and neighbour, but also because of what Jesus says at the end. He says, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." This means that all the law and prophets, ie scripture, is to be interpreted in light of these two most important commandments to love God and neighbour. So, when you next read your bible and come across a piece of scripture that doesn't seem right, or consistent, ask yourself, how is this scripture informed by the two great commandments, and contemplate the Word in this context.

I think this Gospel reading is also a huge message of hope. The idea that our relationship with God is an enduring one, today, tomorrow and forever, that it transcends our mortal understanding of life. And this is such hope, such good news to tell friends and family, and anyone else who will listen. Perhaps as we come into the Advent period and a time where people are more open to coming to church for Christmas services, perhaps it's time to brush up our God story, our 100 word story of how God, or Jesus, has made a difference in our lives. Perhaps this is a specific event, or perhaps it's an aspect of our faith, like hope in eternal life, or perhaps it's even just the simple message of being able to thank someone else, someone bigger than ourselves or those around us, for the many blessings of life, love and relationship. Let's all take a feather out of Jesus' cap in these challenging and changing times, and be prepared for one of those divine appointments, when someone asks us why do we believe, or what gives us hope for the future.

Let us pray.

Gracious and generous God, We give thanks for your word to us this morning. For showing us the wonder of Jesus and his ability to deal with the trickiest of questions. We ask that you give us wisdom and courage to be able to respond to friends, family and others who ask us about our faith. We ask that you give us the words that will stir their hearts and prompt them to know more. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.