

## **THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE**

15<sup>th</sup> November 2009

Mark 12:18-27 This Life, the Next Life, and Sex

Would you be here tonight if you were not expecting to go to heaven?

I don't mean right now, of course, but when you die. If you did not have the hope of an eternity spent in heavenly bliss, would you bother to come to church? Would you bother to come up the hill on a wet dark autumn evening, when you could stay at home and relax in front of the telly, or go down the pub with your mates before the world of work starts up again tomorrow morning.

I've been asking myself that question over the last week or two to try to get into the mindset of the Sadducees in our passage, who did not believe in the Resurrection. The old joke goes, that's why they were Sad, you see! But there must be more to it than that.

So how crucial is Heaven to your faith?

Is it the hope of the Resurrection which makes everything worth while? Or would you choose to still live your life as a Christian if you knew this life was all there is?

Many of you will already be thinking of that passage in 1 Corinthians 15 (v19) where Paul says "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." I've always had a problem with that logic, probably because I've not had to suffer much for my faith like Paul had. Clearly there is the little issue that, if there is no Resurrection, then Jesus is a liar, our sins aren't atoned for, and the whole moral framework comes tumbling down. But if we set that aside as a thought experiment, there is an interesting question here: if there is no after-life, how much should we bother about God?

What value is there in following in his ways if we don't expect a reward at the end of it?

Are we really better off living our lives to please ourselves, indulging in whatever we want to without fear of judgement? Would we eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we die? Is it foolish to seek to live a pure and self-giving life, being generous to others and putting them first if we don't get compensated in heaven?

If only for the next life we have hope in Christ, then have we missed out big time in this life?

Surely there is intrinsic value in living life on earth within the guidelines and purposes of the one who created life in the first place? For then we are living consistently with what, and who, is there, and not battling against the way he has created both us and our world.

Is it not true that it is more blessed to give than to receive, not because we will receive more in heaven than the one to whom we have given on earth, but because our souls find more peace in the way of giving than the way of taking? I believe our materialistic society has proved that to the extreme. Many people are living examples of the saying, a person's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. Retail therapy is not a cure to depression, but a cause – not least because of the crippling debt that often goes with it.

I think my life is richer now, after over 30 years as a committed Christian, than it would have been had I followed my own path. For sure I might be driving a flashier car or have a big flat-screen telly, but I would most likely be less fulfilled, have less sense of purpose and identity, and less contentment with what I have. Even, perhaps especially, in the hard times I have come through stronger because of God's relationship with me.

Which gets to the crux of my argument: to lament our lives in the here and now as a tragedy we have to endure to get to heaven is surely to belittle the indwelling power of the Spirit in our lives.

So it is my considered opinion that it is worth being a Christian only for this life.

If, somehow, the Sadducees were right that there is no Resurrection, and if somehow that was consistent with God's revelation and plans, then absolutely it would be worth while.

Yet while at one level I can appreciate how the Sadducees did NOT go around with sad faces because they had no hope of the afterlife, it still doesn't quite add up.

I keep coming back to the feeling, the thought, the reality that the best is yet to come. If it is good and uplifting to enjoy times of worship and prayer, to be blessed in God's presence, then doesn't it also feel wrong that this doesn't last, that we are soon back down to earth in the relative drudgery of our mundane lives?

I remember a similar feeling in the run up to our wedding, when it was so hard to say goodbye to Ashlea and head home alone of a night. Our time together when we were engaged was good, despite the odd argument! But there was also the sense of expectation that what was to come was going to be the real thing, with courtship just a prelude.

It is that feeling that this life is a prelude to the next that I can't escape.

Perhaps this is what Paul means, that we are to be pitied because we live our lives in expectation of something that is not going to come about. If there was no such thing as marriage, then courtship would still be worth while – but only if we could accept that this is all there is going to be, and not pointlessly look forward to a day that is never going to come.

I guess this exercise has given me a bit more empathy with the Sadducees. I'm always suspicious of pure villains in stories. You know the sort that are caricatured as soulless monsters with no qualms about killing old ladies, so that we can rejoice in their violent end in films like the Die Hard series. There is (almost) always more to it than that, and while we want to avoid being blown all over the place by false teaching, we can always learn something by dissecting rather than dismissing their views.

The Sadducees were a priestly sect who had been flourishing in Judea for about 150 years before Christ's ministry. Their origin goes back further than that, possibly to Zadock the priest during David's reign. They were the Conservative Party of the Jewish establishment. They were wealthy aristocrats, born into privileged backgrounds, successful in a material sense despite the Roman occupation. They were the fundamentalists of fundamentalists, who took as their only authority the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Their lives were bound up with worship in the Temple, and so when it was destroyed in AD 70 they quickly disappeared from the pages of history. That must have been a great shock to their world view; but not as big a shock as Jesus gave them.

Their great rivals were the Pharisees, who I used to think were the ones who took things too literally. They accepted the writings of the Prophets as well as the Law, and also the other history books such as Kings or Ruth – effectively our old testament. But they added to the Law their own traditions, or Mishnah, which laid a defence of other commandments around what Moses had revealed to them.

Interestingly, and somewhat against what we might expect, the Pharisees were more liberal in their interpretation of the Law than the Sadducees. For example, take the famous law of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. While the Sadducees would take that literally and gouge someone’s eye out, the Pharisees reasoned that the command was talking about proportionality and fairness, not about bloody retribution. And so they would exact the *value* of a tooth or an eye in compensation to the victim, not the maiming of the perpetrator in vengeance.

In this regard the Pharisees were quite enlightened, as was the case in their belief in the Resurrection. They accepted Daniel when he wrote of the end times in 12:2:

*<sup>2</sup> Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. <sup>3</sup> Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*

And likewise they saw the promise of Resurrection when David wrote in Psalm 16:

*<sup>9</sup> Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;*

*my body also will rest secure,*

*<sup>10</sup> because you will not abandon me to the grave,  
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.*

*<sup>11</sup> You have made known to me the path of life;  
you will fill me with joy in your presence,  
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

As I mentioned earlier, the Sadducees accepted nothing apart from Genesis through Deuteronomy, and so were bitterly opposed to what they saw as heresy. They could not see anywhere in the books of Moses that spoke of Resurrection – and they should know, for they would memorise the entire text! For them, this life was all God had ever intended people to have, and they would receive more blessing in this life by following the Law God had revealed through Moses. If someone wanted to reject the Law, they were free to do so – but would suffer the consequences in this life. And because they were the well-off elite, it all fitted together nicely in their minds.

You would be forgiven for wondering, then, why it was that they chose a question about a heaven they did not believe in to trap Jesus. The Pharisees had given it their best shot with their question about taxes to Caesar, only to be rendered speechless by Christ’s excellent response, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”. And now the Sadducees are trying to do a similar thing with this question.

Their intention was to show the absurdity of a belief in the after-life by using the example of an unfortunate barren woman who had been married seven times. The Law – which was not in dispute as such between Pharisees and Sadducees – made provision for the sad case where a man died leaving no children. This is found in Deuteronomy 25, and elsewhere. His closest relative, normally a brother, had a duty not merely to look after the childless widow, but to attempt to produce a son and heir on behalf of his dead brother – a practice known as Leverite marriage. It was quite common in those sorts of cultures, and, assuming you accept polygamy as normal, was a compassionate way both to look after a young widow, and to respect the memory of the untimely deceased.

The test case they had developed was a hypothetical one where seven hapless brothers had taken their turn to marry the woman, fail to produce children, and die. Each one of them would have a legitimate claim over the woman in heaven, but of course it was unthinkable for them to be able to share her as polyandry (the female equivalent of polygamy) was obviously an outrage. Remember this was a male-dominated society!

There is an additional subtlety in their argument which unfortunately is lost in our translation. This comes in verse 19, where the literal translation of “have children” is “raise up seed” – using the same word as for the “resurrection” in verse 23. Their implication is that the true “resurrection” is in fact the continuing of your genetic line through your offspring, which, everyone hoped, would continue forever. We are immortal through our children who bear our image and makeup, just as we bear our forefathers’.

In fact, the chief reason for Leverite marriage is to continue the family line or name of the husband. There was an aspect of property and land rights too, but it was the name and line that was important – the implication being that it was bad for ANYONE not to have passed their genes onto the next generation. The Sadducees took this as further support for their position - that it is children who are the real “resurrection” – as if there is an actual resurrection then it wouldn’t be so important for everyone to have children of their own!

Now as a quick aside, this idea of a heaven-less religion finds some resonance with modern (though probably not post-modern) thought. For a start, such religion does not appeal to some un-provable after-life to right the wrongs of society, and so many of the historic excesses of religion would be prevented. If there is no heaven, then there is no point being a suicide bomber (if there ever was).

Then there is the question of the importance of continuing your family line, which evolutionists will tell you is indeed the prime purpose of life on earth! No doubt Dawkins and his ilk would object to their clinging to the idea of a God at all, but at least they don’t offend him with the suggestion that he will face judgement and damnation for not believing in that God.

Anyway, this example “proved” that there could be no resurrection, and was normally an argument that the Pharisees hated because they could not find a conclusive retort. But they would welcome the chance to see Jesus squirm as he was challenged with it.

This does not so much confound Jesus as sadden him, not just because he knew they were trying to trap him, but because they were so badly mistaken in their fundamental assumptions.

The test case they brought was nonsense, because the whole issue of marriage in heaven is a nonsense. We will no more be married in heaven than will the Angels, he says. Which was probably a calculated dig at them, because of course they did not believe in angels either! We'll come on to the consequences of this statement for our view of heaven a little later, but first we need to deal with the issue of whether there is a heaven or not.

Of course Jesus knew they did not believe in life after death, he didn't need to be the Son of God to realise that. But he also knew just how profoundly wrong they were, and this error and miss-interpretation of God's revelation would anger him. They had thought that there was no evidence for the Resurrection in their Law, but Jesus knew that exactly the opposite was true. Not only is the evidence there, but it is right at the most prominent place in the revelation of God to Man. Right at the centre of the verses that the Sadducees would memorise from little children, right at the heart of their scriptures where God reveals himself to the great Law-giver Moses in the burning bush, right where he reveals his holiest of holy name, right under their noses is irrefutable evidence of the resurrection of the dead:

"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Not "I was their God", but "I AM". We don't have time to look at it tonight, but this revelation of God as the Great I AM is fundamental to life – he is the self-existing one, the unchangeable, the beginning and the end. And he IS the God of Abraham! Abraham, today, acknowledges God as Lord.

He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

Jesus, in the final few days before his crucifixion, was well aware of the reality of the Resurrection – he spoke of his own, and indeed it was to save us from a Resurrection to the second death that he came in the first place. So he is quite scathing of their position: not only did it show that they didn't really know the scriptures which they so proudly thought they were upholding, but they didn't know the Power of God at all.

It is in the Resurrection that we see God's power most clearly – the power to transform death to life. While other works of God in history could (perhaps) be explained away as "natural" phenomena, this clearly could not. Before Christ's own resurrection, the next life was, even for the Pharisees, a bit of a theory; but since then God has proved his power and we do well to take note.

I wonder if any of those Sadducees were prepared to listen to what Jesus said, to search through their scriptures and put this idea to the test. That would be such a shock to their system, more profound even than the destruction of the Temple they based their lives around in 40 years time. This is the moment that the Sadducee tradition began to die: the moment that it was shown to them that the dead do live on!

But I suspect they were too close minded and set in their own beliefs to take this on board. How foolish they were to think that they knew every detail of the scriptures, and could not possibly be wrong on any point. And as ever when we point the finger at these set-in-their-ways people, we point three right back at us – for are we not just as guilty of holding arrogantly to our long-held interpretations, without even searching the scriptures to see how well another idea fits?

Perhaps it's my increasing years, but I am less pedantic now regarding peripheral details of my faith than I was 30 years ago. But more sure of the core!

Which is maybe a good point to start thinking about the question of what heaven will be like if there is no marriage there – as we have to approach this question with a level of humility. I think the only fair comment to make at the outset is that we don't really know much about heaven at all. We know enough, enough to know that it is a far better place than the alternative, enough to know that we will be surrounded by God's love in an environment where there is no sorrow or mourning. But anyone who tells you categorically that we are going to do this or be like that is probably fooling themselves, maybe even as much as the Sadducees had fooled themselves about there not being a heaven in the first place!

Of course the real question is not about marriage in heaven – Jesus has answered that already. The real question, as my salacious title hinted at, is will there be any sex in heaven?

Well, not surprisingly the Bible doesn't have much to say about that directly, unlike the Koran and associated Muslim traditions, which we are well aware of thanks to suicide bombers. There are verses both in the Koran itself and in their traditions – which are supposed to be other sayings of Mohammed which were passed down orally from his original followers – verses which talk about the copious supply of virgin wives for Muslim men. The most famous suggests that they will get 72 each, and it is this one which is twisted further by extremists to apply only to those who die as martyrs for the cause – whereas from what I can find out this seems to be the happy lot of all Muslims. All Muslim males, that is. The eternal fate of the women is not so important, again reflecting the highly patriarchal nature of society in ancient times.

Amusingly, there seems to be a good case that the whole thing is a bit of a misunderstanding, with the correct translation of “virgin” being “raisin” – believe it or not - which puts quite a different complexion on things. 72 raisins are unlikely to inspire young men to blow themselves up. Unfortunately, that translation is unlikely to be accepted by the Jihadists, so Dawkins will continue to have fuel for his argument that religion – and in particular religious belief in the after-life – is the root of all evil.

But as I mentioned earlier you can't have Christianity without the Resurrection. Yet we have so little to go on about what heaven is like, so we need to take what little we are told and build out from there.

Taking the fact that there will be no marriage in heaven, I suppose the first thing to say is that this fits with the entirely different purpose and order of society.

In this life, it is essential for each generation to raise up the next, otherwise the human race would die out. It is a consequence of the natural order of life on earth. Despite attempts to try other ways, the best way of raising children is in families where Mum and Dad are married. And so marriage really is the bed-rock of society on earth.

Faithfulness in marriage is important too, not just for stability in the family, but in ensuring that it is the husband's line that is being continued, and not the milk-man's.

But Heaven will be very different. There will be no marriage in heaven, because there will be no “next generation” to raise up. All generations from earth will be alive – and presumably in the peak of fitness – together, at the same time, in heaven. There is no need to procreate, and so presumably no possibility of getting pregnant.

I suspect that means we will all be vegetarians in heaven, as otherwise there would need to be an ongoing cycle of life and death in the animal kingdom. But then again, maybe that is how it will be – with “just” us humans being immortal in an otherwise mortal world. Another example where we can speculate endlessly – and not get any wiser.

But what of our relationships to one another? If there is no special relationship of marriage, what other relationships will there be?

Well, for a start it is likely that we will recognise each other from our earthly past, and those relationships will continue in some form in heaven. We won't be “wiped clean” or “rebooted” in heaven with no knowledge of our earlier lives.

That in turn means that we will have at least the memory of our sexuality. We will know if we have been male or female. Of course that difference goes much more than skin deep, it penetrates every cell of our bodies now, and impacts on so many of our attitudes and so much of our thinking.

That diversity is important to God. It's how he created us to be, even before the Fall. Of course we have corrupted this in so many ways – like in chauvinism where men deny that women are of equal value (or possibly vice versa), or in the more current egalitarianism where people pretend that there is no difference between the sexes. How many films do you see now where the heroine takes on men in physical tasks and fights on equal terms? The truth is that we are different and we are of equal value. That comes from the heart of God, whose image we bear.

So most philosophers think there will be sexual identity in heaven – we will still be male or female, not some sort of neuter.

The difference of the sexes now is what enables reproduction, and of course it is that act that we call, somewhat restrictively, sex. If there is no reproduction in heaven, will it be possible to have sex?

Some people take the view that, since sex is not just for reproduction on earth, that in heaven we will be able to enjoy sex too. Of course the rules will be different – no special relationships in marriage – and so would the motives be too. So much sex now is driven by selfish impulses, but in heaven our driving force will be love for others. Presumably we will have a genuine and deep love for our brothers and sisters in heaven, and will want to give them enjoyment. Sex now is essentially private and behind closed doors, for the purpose of “decency”, just as since the fall our naked bodies are hidden from each other. Would that be needed in heaven? Will there be any closed doors? Or any clothes? That's difficult to get your worldly mind around.

I personally think it much more likely that the private, one-on-one, exclusive (at least in the moment) relationship that sex on earth is will not continue in heaven. There will be no need of sperm and eggs, no need for periods, or breasts. So I suspect our heavenly bodies will be genetically different to our current ones, in way that would be unsustainable in our world. Maybe we won't even have belly-buttons! But just as today there is a wide variety of colour and shapes and sizes, not to mention two distinct sexes, I suspect those sorts of varieties will continue.

Whereas now our differences can divide us into factions, can separate the attractive from the ugly, and can cause deep insecurities and unhappiness with our body-image, none of this will be true in heaven. No-one will find you unattractive, no-one will judge you because you are different to them. And one of the great pleasures will be finding unity in our diversity.

We will at least, I believe, be able to hug each other in heaven. And that hug will convey as much love, perhaps even more love, even deeper love, than the best sex can convey today.

For those of us who are married and have grown so accustomed to being with our other halves in this life, I'm sure we will see a lot of each other in the next too – and probably have a special affection. But if there is no sex in heaven, it is because we all have something better to do! The focus of our attention will not be on one another, but on our Lord and Saviour whom we will finally be able to meet. That is where the real joy in heaven comes from; that is what makes heaven bliss, that is what will make eternity exciting and dynamic.

We can be sure of this, because that much Christ *has* told us.

I can hardly wait!