

## **Luke 20.27-38**

Sunday 7 November 2004: 8.00am Christ Church Abingdon

### **Introduction**

One of my New Testament lecturers once decided to do a spoof lecture. He wanted to know how far he could get through a lecture before one of the students said anything.

So he invented 'retro-redactional criticism'. For a whole hour he lectured on how the New Testament can only be understood properly if it is read backwards. Amazingly, almost all of them swallowed it!

Although none of us reads the Bible backwards, we often fail to read it properly: we don't read it backwards, but we do read it selectively. This gospel-story is an example of that.

### **The Challenge**

At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus is teaching in the temple, telling the good news. His enemies approach, circling round him, trying to find the question that will catch him out. Between them they ask three things, and Jesus answers each one easily.

The first is simply a question: "By what authority are you doing these things?" The second is a practical challenge: "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Jesus' answers are pure genius – shaming them into silence first, stunning them into silence second, and telling the parable of the tenants against them in between. This chapter is a series of four short, punchy scenes; one parable and three questions.

Our passage today is the third of these three questions. We don't know much about the Sadducees. This passage tells us most of what we do know: they didn't believe in the resurrection, and were Jesus' enemies, together with the Pharisees and the Herodians.

They begin their question by quoting the law of Levirate marriage, from Deuteronomy 25. This law states that if a man dies childless, his brother must marry his widow, and the first child of that marriage must be raised in his name. The two examples of it that we have in the Bible are Tamar, who is Judah's daughter-in-law. Her husband dies, and she marries his brother. The other is Ruth and Boaz.

Having quoted this law, the Sadducees invent a story.

There's a family, with seven brothers. Imagine that lot when they play football in the garden! I wonder how many windows they broke.

The oldest brother grows up, finds a nice girl, and marries her. What a day – the Mums are both crying in the front row, the groom and his six best men standing there in their suits.

But then disaster strikes! On the honeymoon, the groom dies! Everyone is most upset, and to take their minds off it they plan the

Second, be open to the Bible telling you something you weren't expecting. God's face is described in the pages of the Bible – not yours. Recognising that it is *conceivable* that we *might* be wrong about *something* (!) is the first step towards making sure we find *God* in the Bible and not ourselves.

read them backwards like my lecturer tried to convince his students that they needed to do. But we do read them selectively.

The problem with reading the Bible selectively is quite simple. When we do it, who selects the bits of the Bible that we read? We do. So whose face do we see when we look at the pages of Scripture? We don't see God's face, we see our own face staring back at us. We find exactly what we expected to find, we read exactly what we thought the Bible said, we confirm everything we believed before we even opened the book.

But the Bible is so big – hundreds of pages long, how can we possibly do justice to all of it, all the time? Well, we can't. But what we can do is be aware of our tendency to focus on little things, ignoring the big picture. The Sadducees focused on one small law, forgetting the one who gave the law to Moses in the first place.

I wonder if we all have our own favourite Bible verses that we wheel out regularly to prove that we're right. What do we do when we read passages that seem to say something slightly different to our favourite verses? Do we change our minds? Or more often, do we simply ignore the challenge?

I am going to offer two applications to help us to make sure we don't read our Bibles selectively.

First, read a lot of it. Don't stick to the same old books – Matthew, John, Romans and Philipians. When was the last time you read Numbers? Or the minor prophets?

wedding of the widow to the second brother.

But the same happens again – and it's the third brother's turn. At this point the bride's parents aren't looking too happy, and are trying to convince the bridesmaids to wear the same dresses twice. Shame they don't have Jesus to make 180 gallons of wine for them from water-jars.

So just imagine how everyone feels when it's the turn of the seventh brother. Imagine how he feels! I think if I were him I'd be more than a little nervous. Perhaps the poor woman can't cook.

And then, sure enough on the honeymoon she cooks him kippers.

"So who," say the Sadducees, "will she be married to in the resurrection? They can't all be married to her at once," they say, "so the resurrection is clearly a load of cobblers."

What the Sadducees had done was not read the Bible backwards, but read it *selectively*. They read one verse of the Bible, and drew conclusions about something from just that one verse.

### **The Reply – Part One**

Jesus' response is in two parts. First, he says, marriage is only for this life, and not for the next. In this age – that is, now – people get married and are given in marriage. Marriage is absolutely part of God's sovereign plan for us, now. In Genesis God creates marriage as soon as he creates people. A stable marriage is the most basic and the most fundamental family unit. A woman and a man have to leave the families they have grown up in,

and create a new family of their own. “Son” becomes “father”, “daughter” becomes “mother”. This is absolutely what God wants for us, now.

But there’s that line in the marriage service isn’t there: “till death do us part.” In this age the promises that are made when two people get married should never be broken. The vows are for life.

But only for life – in the age to come, Jesus says, there will be no marriage. People will not marry, nor will they be given in marriage. All marriage vows that are made in this age are fulfilled when we die, so none of us will be married in heaven. To all married couples here today, I can say with absolute certainty: “Your marriage isn’t going to last. Its days are numbered.”

We might find this difficult, and it would be, were it not the case that marriage is replaced with something far better. All our family ties – husband and wife, mother and daughter, grandson and grandad – will be broken, and replaced with something far better. Our bodies, frail and diseased, will be replaced with something far better.

Jesus tells us here that we will be God’s children, since we will be children of the resurrection. We will have new bodies that will never die, we will have the best Father we could ever hope for. And all the family ties that are broken with death will be re-made, but this time as brother and sister. We will all be before God as his children. I can’t wait!

Now, remember why Jesus said this. He was countering the selective reading of the Law by the Sadducees. He now addresses this issue directly, showing them that in their desire to prove him wrong, they have been blinded to the truth of Scripture.

### **The Reply – Part Two**

Jesus’ demonstration that Scripture teaches the resurrection is startling. The first time I read it, I didn’t quite get it, I have to admit. But it’s really quite obvious, I think I was looking for something clever.

First of all, Jesus recalls how God tells Moses that he is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. Then he quotes the Old Testament principle that God is God of the living, not of the dead. Therefore, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must be alive, because God is God of the living, not of the dead.

And if they are alive then they must have been resurrected, because they had quite definitely died when God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush.

So easily Jesus shows the Sadducees that they were wrong in their interpretation of the Bible. They had focused too much on one verse, bringing their own agenda to it, and finding what they wanted to find.

### **Conclusion**

That is such a danger that we all face when we read our Bibles. We don’t