

## [Luke 20:27-38](#)

Did you ever like putting one over on your teachers? I wondered at the chutzpah of a fellow student at theological college, who wrote at the top of one of his exam essays the verse from the Psalms which reads, 'I have more wisdom than all my teachers.' I hope he wrote some good answers!

Or perhaps you liked to prove the clever kid in the class wrong, or you rejoiced when they had a bad day? I have to say that I saw that one from the other side. I'm afraid I *was* the clever kid in the class, especially when it came to Maths. One year in an exam at secondary school I so rushed my answers because I thought it was all too easy that I found myself plummeting from first out of two hundred students in my year to fourteenth, Oh, the shame! And I am sure that many other teenagers enjoyed my temporary downfall.

That's a little like what the Sadducees were attempting in our reading today. How they would love to smear egg on Jesus' face! How they would love to bring him down a peg or two and reduce his credibility and authority with the crowds.

But why would they want to do that?

The Sadducees were historically connected to the Jerusalem priesthood, and they were generally a wealthy lot, who ensured they kept themselves comfortable by keeping in with the powerful. So they were very pally with the Roman forces that were occupying the Promised Land. People like that didn't want to acknowledge the authority of Jesus, because following his teaching would undermine their addiction to power and wealth. If they could only discredit this pesky popular working-class preacher, then maybe his words wouldn't keep them awake at night anymore.

Now what on earth does that have to do with us? We don't want to undermine Jesus, surely? We love him. Jesus is our friend and our Saviour. We owe everything to him.

But sometimes we don't want to hear what he says, either. His teaching is too uncomfortable for us at times. We don't want to make him look foolish, still less look to carry out a character assassination, but we have our ways of making his awkward teaching irrelevant. So when he says challenging things about money and possessions, we argue that those sayings were only for those particular people at that specific time, and they don't have universal

application – at least, not in that form. Or when we find that Jesus believed in the existence of demons and this apparently offends our scientific minds, we say that Jesus was just a man of his time and he wouldn't have known about the existence of mental illness. You can add your own examples to this list.

The trouble, though, is this. As the late John Stott used to say, you can't accept Jesus as Saviour without also confessing him as Lord. It's not possible just to have the benefits of salvation without all that follows in the commitment of discipleship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the **first challenge** in our reading this morning is a **challenge to our wills**: will we bow the knee and truly acknowledge Jesus Christ not only as Saviour, but also as Lord?

Let's move on. The **second challenge** is a **challenge to our minds**. What on earth is all this strange stuff about seven brothers each in turn marrying the same woman as one after another, they die?

It's a Jewish custom, taken from the Old Testament, known as 'Levirate Marriage'. A man had to have children to inherit from him. It's rather like the concern many men have in our society to pass on the family surname to a son. Hence if in ancient Israel a man died without fathering children, it became the task of the next brother to marry the widow and father children that would count as the first man's heirs.

Hence the Sadducees can build up their ludicrous story in an attempt to ridicule Jesus and his belief in the resurrection. For the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection. They predominantly only read the first five books of the Bible rather than the later ones, which the Pharisees read. And as they saw it, there was nothing about resurrection in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy. To be fair, there's very little in other Old Testament Scriptures, either: the resurrection of the righteous is taught in Daniel, and it may be hinted at in Job, but there's precious little.

So they tell their imaginary story. You can almost hear the smug self-satisfaction as they think they have proved to Jesus that his belief in the resurrection is laughable. If you want a similar example in our society, then think about the way some militant atheists laugh when they think they have dismissed what you and I believe as ignorant superstition.

But Jesus takes the Sadducees to task for a failure of logic. They just haven't thought this through. Passing on the family name assumes that generations are going to die and need replacing; how is that going to happen with the resurrection, in which there will be no more death?

Friends, not all of those who oppose Christianity have thought through their objections carefully. Richard Dawkins in particular is one who recycles and rehashes old, tired arguments that have long been refuted by Christians. If we can get a hearing for our convictions (and I grant you that isn't always easy) then it can be quite simple to refute what people like him say.

But if the opponents of Jesus are shown up for not using their minds well, then it behoves Christians to use their thinking to the glory of God. Remember that Jesus said we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, *mind* and strength.

And I say that knowing how reluctant some Christians are to think hard about their faith and about life. Many years ago, someone suggested that the church carries on as if the old Sunday School chorus wasn't 'Jesus wants me for a sunbeam' so much as 'Jesus wants me for a zombie'. Ministers see congregations glaze over corporately when they ask them to think hard.

But this is what we must do, prayerfully, as an act of worship. I don't mean that everyone has to be an intellectual – that isn't everybody's gift – but we do all need to think to the glory of God about our faith. I hear church members complain about the public success of the new atheists in recent years, but when it comes to it they don't want to make an effort with their minds themselves. They would rather bury their brains in the sand. Yet if we want to counter them and show that the Christian vision has more power to explain life than theirs, then we have to dedicate our thinking to God, pray that the Holy Spirit will help us in the life of the mind, and seek to express what Paul calls in 2 Corinthians 'the mind of Christ'.

**Thirdly** and finally, the reading contains **a challenge to our vision**. Who or what controls our vision and imagination? I suggest to you that in a lot of areas – and certainly when we consider life after death – Christians have surrendered their vision and imagination to non-Christian sources. Our account of faith becomes seriously sub-biblical, if not downright unbiblical.

What do I mean? Listen to the average Christian talking about death and the hereafter and you hear a range of convictions that have nothing to do with

historic Christianity. When someone dies, we hear people say that it doesn't matter, because the body is just a shell for the real person, for the soul. Friends, that isn't biblical thinking, that's pagan Greek philosophy.

The life of the world to come doesn't consist in us being disembodied souls floating on clouds. The vision of Jesus and the apostles is of resurrection. That's bodily. In fact, you might say it's bodily plus, given the additional powers that the resurrection body of Jesus seemed to have. You can't even use Jesus' reference to being 'like the angels' (verse 36) as anything other than bodily: in the Bible, angels manifestly have bodies.

The vision Jesus gives us here is of the bodily and the physical in a new existence – souped-up, if you like. You might say that something physical is missing here: if there is to be no marrying and no childbirth in the new creation, then presumably there is no more sex after death. Here is the reason why our marriage vows are 'till death do us part': marriage doesn't figure in the new world.

But then we have already said that there is no more need for procreation, because generations will not need to be replaced. And surely the intimacy and ecstasy possible between a husband and a wife will be superseded by even closer, deeper, and more intense relationship with our God. Not only will we now see face to face rather than through a glass darkly (according to 1 Corinthians 13), we can also expect – according to Augustine of Hippo – for everything in the new creation to mediate the presence of God to us.

Our Christian vision of relationships, then, in the new heavens and the new earth, is not one that can be reduced to being reunited with our loved ones, however comforting that may be. It is about being together in the undiluted presence of God.

And because this is not about disembodied souls, let alone harp players on clouds, it sets before us a vision of a healed creation and restored relationships with God and one another.

Once you state it in those terms, you can see that we have something we can anticipate in this life, albeit not perfectly. We can work for the healing of people and of our planet. We can work for reconciliation with God through the Cross of Christ, and for peace-making between people. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can pray for healing, work for justice, evangelise, and reconcile

in the name of Jesus. When we do so, we are pointing the world towards God's great future and witnessing to Jesus Christ by sharing that vision.

Indeed, we witness to him as well when we are willing – like Jesus – to use our minds for his glory, to think through difficult issues of faith in the light of Scripture and in listening to hard questions.

We also witness to our Lord and Saviour when we acknowledge that our will comes to an end of itself and must bow to his superior will. We are not just believers, we are disciples.

All of this is possible in the marriage and family life context of our reading, but also in all of our relationships, our networks, neighbourhoods, places of work, and our leisure environments.