

Sermon for trinity 20 2020

From the Psalm of David, psalm 110 verse 1.

*The Lord said unto my Lord: Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.*

This is the punchline at the end of a very long day. Jesus has been pushed by the Sadducees and the Pharisees as they have set trap after trap for him. The challenge concerning the greatest of the commandments is the third in a row.

The Sadducees are the first to challenge Jesus. In the course of these three traps it is important to remember that the Sadducees and the Pharisees do not agree on everything. In fact, in some matters regarding the faith they are complete opposites. Life after death is classic. The Sadducees believe that the soul dies with the body. For them death is the end of life and there is no more.

The Pharisees believe that there is life after death, and that it will be a physical resurrection. Instead of putting on the spiritual body as St Paul describes entry into eternal life, the pharisees taught that the dead would put the old bodies back on. This is the reason that some ancient beliefs opposed cremation. How could one dress in the old body if it had become mere ashes? It was the horrendous number of deaths, and the total destruction of bodies, during the first world war that challenged this belief. This contributed to Cremation being accepted as appropriate for we do believe in a spiritual eternity in our spiritual body.

The Sadducees begin with a challenge to Jesus which is blatantly political. "Is it lawful to pay taxes?" It was the law that the people pay taxes to Caesar, but the real question is more subtle. Part of the deal for paying taxes was the understanding that it included worship of Caesar. Jesus could not endorse any worship of Caesar without being severely compromised.

It becomes very evident that Jesus lived in poverty for he had to ask for someone to lend him a denarius. The coin had the likeness of Caesar on it and it therefore belonged to Caesar. The Christian person is created in the likeness of God and it is appropriate that they give themselves to God. Give to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar and give to God that which belongs to God. This is a fantastic challenge. And an insightful answer. There can be no response.

The second challenge is the question regarding that poor woman who had to marry seven brothers. In the story line the Sadducees raised the well understood role of a dead brother attempting to produce a son and heir for the first brother. Remember that the Sadducees do not believe in life after death, so this question in itself is total hypocrisy. The truly bizarre question indicates that the woman belongs to the man and that she will need to present herself to the seven brothers in the afterlife in order that one of them can choose her. A truly sickening thought.

Our Lord responds to this by telling these experts in the Law that they do not understand that which they read and profess to know. The answer is that there is no such thing as marriage or death in the kingdom. Angels do not marry, nor are they given in marriage. Jesus supports his answer with reference to the scriptures of the time. One might say that the Sadducees are rightfully put in their place.

The Pharisees would have been very excited by this little scene. Jesus had challenged the Sadducees in such a way that they would have had the equivalent of egg on their face. The joy of the Pharisees was short-lived. Their specialist in the Law asked Jesus which were the greatest of the commandments.

Our Lord answered the Pharisees with just as much forthrightness as he did the Sadducees. He quoted Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 5. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might."* And he followed this with Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18. *"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord."*

Having answered these challenges Jesus now presents a challenge himself. "Whose son is the Messiah?" They answer by stating that the Messiah is the son of David. It is true that Jesus was born from the line of David, but the Messiah is also the Son of God. The people were anticipating a warrior who would become their political leader and who would cast off the shackles of Rome. They anticipated a warrior who would lead them to victory over all oppressors and set them free.

In reality the Messiah was none of these things. The Messiah came to bring people to look to God. The Messiah came to force the people to think about their spiritual future. The Messiah came to raise humanity from a temporary life expectancy into an eternal anticipation. The Messiah came to open minds and hearts to the wonder and the beauty, the love, and the compassion, of God.

This is where the letter of Paul to the Ephesians points us in the right direction. Paul tells us to be careful how we live. We are to be wise in the choices that we make for if we are foolish, we may make bad decisions that will lead us into the evils of the world. If we choose foolishly, our lives will be lost to the temporary things that surround us. He advises us not to drink wine to excess for if we do, it may well blind our judgement and be the cause of bad decisions. It is more important, he says, to be filled with the Spirit of God.

It is when we are filled with the Holy Spirit that we will recognise all that is good and all for which we can be thankful. Instead of complaining and muttering, gossiping and whispering, coveting and being jealous, we are encouraged to give thanks to God for all that we have. We thank God for the relationships we enjoy. We thank God for the love we share with each other. Above all we give thanks to God for sending his Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, to challenge us to think, and to accept, the love that is ours from God. Undeserved but given as a gift that we are to enjoy. Thanks be to God for offering us love and inner peace.