

MARRIAGE IN HEAVEN

So I'll be honest.

When I saw this Sunday's Bible reading from Luke I thought *"Good grief!! I'm definitely not going to use this....."*

And then, as so often happens, I challenged myself to stick with it. Sometimes preaching can be like a dare!

So we've got two subjects here.

First is the crazy (and deliberately annoying) question Jesus was asked referring to the obscure (to us) practice of levirate marriage.

And then, secondly, there's some questions about what heaven is going to be like. Give us the details on heaven, Jesus.

How do you talk about stuff like that?

Very often the religious group Jesus is dealing with are the Pharisees.

In today's reading it's the Sadducees.

They are the wealthiest of the religious groups, they're strict, though not as devout as the Pharisees, very politically conservative, and, in fact, (much to the annoyance of their fellow countrymen and women), are often willing to collaborate with Roman rule.

But one feature of their group (which comes into play here) is that they don't believe in an afterlife.

For them 'dead' is dead. There is only one life. After that it's all over.

And it annoys them that Jesus seems to be teaching a different message.

So they decide to trip him up by asking a question he will struggle to answer.

"If seven brothers all marry the same woman, and they all die - and you say there is a heaven - which one of them will be her husband in the life to come?"

Now the idea of seven brothers marrying the same woman seems a bit unlikely (and it is!) - but at least it's based on a custom that was practiced in ancient Israel.

It was called levirate marriage.

If a man marries and dies without producing a child or heir, then it was the duty of the man's brother to marry the woman and have children with her so that the family line will continue on.

Now back in the day this must have happened sometimes though I'm sure it never happened that one woman actually ended up marrying seven different brothers.

The Sadducees deliberately exaggerated their tale to make the situation (and Jesus) look even more ridiculous.

How would it work out in heaven? Can you explain *that*, Jesus?

Now over many of the last years, as you will know, there's been an awful lot of talk in churches about sexuality. Of course, its not been quite so much about sexuality as it has been about *homosexuality*.

What should the church's attitude be towards the LGBT community?

Now one of the claims made by many Christians is that God's plan for human sexuality is one man and one woman together in a monogamous relationship. The family unit is the basic building block in society and the best model to enable human beings to flourish – providing stability support companionship and love for both parents and children.

Now I'm all for the family unit. I think the family unit is the most **usual** basic unit for society and I'm sure God thinks so too.

But although that seems to be the most common arrangement, it doesn't mean there can't be any other variations, especially as there are homosexual people in our world who deserve loving relationships too.

But what annoys me is when people in defending the family unit and the marriage of one man to one woman say this.

"It's the plain teaching of the Bible from beginning to end."

God wants to see one man and one woman in a monogamous relationship and there are no alternatives.

The reason why it annoys me is that its complete nonsense!

These words just aren't true!

This is clearly not what the Bible says.

When people say this is the plain teaching of scripture I want to say to them

"Have you ever actually read the Bible?"

Look through the Bible and see what is there!

It does talk about one man and one woman relationship and that family unit.

But there's much more in there too.

Whole lists of rules and practices concerning sex and relationships, many of which date back to the time when the tribe of Israel was just forming.

Perfectly acceptable then was the idea that if you were rich or royalty that you might have sex with slaves, or own your very own harem.

Perfectly acceptable was the idea of polygamy.

Perfectly acceptable was making sex slaves out of prisoners or war or arranging underage marriage.

Perfectly acceptable was the idea of treating women as property – where the rights of women as human beings were almost non-existent and where the law sided with men so much that a woman's word was not admissible in a court of law.

Like other primitive societies that wanted to keep themselves separate from other nations and keep the clan blood 'pure', the Israelites introduced the idea of Levirate marriage, which was sanctioned by the tribes in Deuteronomy (25:5-6).

I don't know any Christian who would be advocating these things today.

There are so many practices and customs particularly from the early period of Israelite history that we have moved on from today, partly as a result of some things that Jesus and other NT writers have said and partly with the passage of time as God has helped us progress in our understanding of what it means to be fair and decent and human.

So when Christians are speaking about sexual ethics and mention about the plain teaching of the Bible, they are talking nonsense.
The Bible is far more complicated than that.

And that is why, because there are so many ways in which we have learned more and changed in our thinking on sexual ethics, it is possible for Christians today to come to a new understanding on homosexuality – because God has already moved us on from so many other things, and because we know more about this subject than we ever did before.

So today as we sit here and we've got this subject of levirate marriage in front of us, it doesn't seem very relevant to Glasgow 2016.
There's not many of us on the edge of our seats thinking, I must find out more about the levirate marriage riddle that the Sadducees have posed to Jesus.

But maybe there's another way we *are* a bit interested.

We might not have much experience of levirate marriage, but we have certainly had experience of people being married more than once.

In these times we live in, marriages fail at an alarming rate.

We might not know many women who have been married seven times, but we all know people who have been married more than once.
Maybe that's us. Or a close friend. Or maybe our parents were once divorced.
Maybe we live in a reconstituted family. There are step mums and step children.

And so we think to ourselves – there is an interesting question here.
If we are to believe that life does not end at the crematorium gates, but continues on, if we are to believe with Jesus that there is more life to come – that there is some heaven, then what happens?

If you die, having been married more than once, who will your partner be in heaven?

Our problem is that in thinking about another world we're usually still thinking of this one.

We start to think about a parallel world to our own instead of something that we can't really imagine or describe.

Because it's impossible to think about something you can't imagine.

It's like CS Lewis coming up with Narnia.

You go there and it is a different world but everyone speaks English, and there are talking animals but basically its still about life and death and the need to eat and adventures and excitement and trouble and tragedy.

CS Lewis' great friend JRR Tolkien came up with his imaginary world Middle Earth. But again these worlds though imaginary are pretty like our own in many ways.

And when we hear descriptions of heaven in the Bible then we start to literalise them when of course they are just inadequate ways of trying to describe something in human terms that cant really be described at all.

Weve got a kingdom of justice, or a party, or a great feast, or a time of worship and praise.

And other images come to us from jokes people have made up about St Peter and the Pearly Gates.

So you hear people saying stupid stuff like:

A kingdom of Justice? What does that mean?

Singing hymns and playing harps all day long? Don't fancy that.

Eating together at a big banquet? We'll soon be full up. Then what do we do?

Living forever? We'll soon be bored.

The reason we think heaven will be boring is that we're still unable to imagine it. We are trying to judge what we think about the future against the world as it is now.

When we got our cat Rowan, one of the first things we did was to teach him his name and get him to respond to it.

That is all he has learned.

When I ask him what he thinks of the latest Teenage Fanclub CD he has nothing to say.

When I speak to his about what's going on the church he doesnt seem that interested.

When I speak about St Mirren's chances of staying up, he is silent.

(Maybe that last is a good enough reply...)

Rowan and I live in the same world. And yet we might as well exist on different worlds. He has no way to understand what is happening in my life.

We simply have no way to comprehend the details of what Jesus says will be the next stage in our journey of life.

So what *did* Jesus say to those Sadducees?

He says there isn't marriage in heaven.

The good news is that shuts up the Sadducees and solves their problem.
But the bad news is that this answer may make us feel disappointed.

So we won't know each other then?
So there is no coming together?
In Heaven we are just existing on our own?

Heaven is completeness. We don't need anything. There is nothing required for our happiness or contentment. We don't need to look after our health. We won't suffer from illness or sadness and there will be no more tears. There's nothing to struggle with or agonise over. There's nothing to give us disappointment. We don't need to look to find things to make us happy.

If we are looking for something else or someone else in order for us to be happy then we are not complete.
But we will be in heaven.

Now you might counter by saying this.
What about the people we love and we have loved, and those who have been taken from us in death?
Does it mean that they will just be forgotten?
Does it mean that love we have shared means nothing? It just ends.....?
Does it mean that our longing to meet together is just a dream?

No! Here's the good news.

In heaven there *will* be reunion. Jesus makes it plain.
We will be together, we will be reunited with one another.
Jesus promised that he was preparing a place for us all and it means we will be together.

All the love we have shared in our time on earth, all the good things we have enjoyed are gifts from God. And all of these good things are but a tiny foretaste of what lies ahead.

God gathers us up together, and brings us together, and so we will be together.
So we don't need to worry.

Last week I was at the funeral of a friend.
His name was John Ainslie. We were friends for years although in some ways I didn't know him all that well. It's because he was a very shy and quiet man.

He grew up as the son of a minister and joined the army when he was 17. He was sent to Hong King of all places for his first 3 years and then onto Northern Ireland.

What he experienced there affected him deeply. He became a pacifist and trained to be a minister in the Church of Scotland. He served as community minister in a housing scheme in Edinburgh before applying to work full time for CND.

For the last 26 years he has been the only fulltime employee of Scottish CND and his knowledge of nuclear weapons systems was extensive and so he was often sought out by the media and people of all political stripes. The books he wrote on disarmament were meticulously researched and well respected.

As you might imagine it was because of his tireless work for peace that I met him and he worked with myself and Ainslie Walton and Lyn Peden and others in Scottish Christians Against Nuclear Arms.

Tragically his only son died when just 21, and John himself contracted cancer 4 years ago. It was the third bout of cancer that ended his life at the age of 62.

John was a member of wellington Church. And his Christian faith was real and strong and able to strengthen him in his last moments on earth.

His minister went to visit him a few days before he died – his death by this time was inevitable.

“How are you?” asked the minister.

And John calmly said to him, *“You know, I’ll be glad when this phase is over.”*

A phase?

Our lives here – a phase?

Yes ,that’s what they are.

This whole life we live is a phase. And the next part of the adventure awaits us all

We don’t know all the details. Right now we can’t imagine almost *any* detail. But we don’t need to worry.

Jesus promises to be there.

And we and our loved ones will find ourselves united with God and with one another.

And that should be enough.

Luke 20:27-40

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