

Are you one of me? ...

... Follow me!

A sermon given on the Third Sunday before Advent, 6th November October 2022 – by Rt Revd Bishop David James, in Beverley Minster

2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-end ; Luke 20:27-38

'As I was going to St Ives, I met a man with seven wives. Each wife had seven sacks. In each sack were seven cats. Each cat had seven kittens. How many were going to St Ives?'

Well, let me spare you from spending the whole of the sermon trying to work it out. The answer is one - as **'I'** was going to St Ives

How many were going to heaven in our Gospel story? In the riddle which the Sadducees set for Jesus, was it eight, the wife and her seven late husbands? Was it two, the wife and her last husband? As far as the Sadducees who'd set the riddle were concerned, the answer was none, because any thought of heaven was a delusion and nonsense. The Sadducees presented Jesus with no innocent riddle. They were testing him on his spiritual credentials. Margaret Thatcher, when Prime Minister, was noted for asking the question, "Is he one of us?" If the person gave the right answers to the right questions, they were indeed 'one of us'. If, however, they gave 'left' answers or worse still, 'wet answers', they were not one of us.

So would Jesus give the right answer?

Two groups of religious leaders feature in this story: the Sadducees and the Scribes. And they didn't see eye to eye with each other. The Sadducees were the fundamentalists - they accepted the law of Moses as enshrined in the first five books of the Bible and little else. They accepted the words literally and they allowed little scope for interpretation. Their scriptures said nothing categorical or explicit about the resurrection of the dead. So for them, there was no resurrection of the dead. And this riddle they presented was making fun of the whole idea. The Sadducee's power base was Jerusalem. They formed the dominant party in the Temple and they collaborated with the Roman occupiers. Furthermore, any talk of a Messiah was anathema to them. Any 'would-be' Messiah would upset the status quo, which was very much weighted in their favour.

The Scribes, on the other hand, gave weight to the Psalms and the Prophets as well as the Law. And they interpreted the Law and they interpreted the interpretations of the Law to cover every area of daily life. And the Scribes did believe in the resurrection of the dead.

They did believe that another King David would come to save God's people. The Scribe's strength was in the synagogues rather than the Temple, in the towns and villages rather than Jerusalem.

So where did Jesus stand in relation to these two power groupings? Is he one of us or is he one of them?

So the Sadducees pose the riddle and the Scribes listen eagerly for his answer. A man dies, leaving his wife childless. The Law requires that his brother marry her to provide offspring who can take over the inheritance. Seven times in all, the poor woman is left widowed and childless. When she gets to the supposed heaven of the Scribes, will she be required to share her favours with all seven?

Jesus uses his response to give some important teaching about the resurrection. First of all, he takes the idea of resurrection from the dead seriously. It's an important matter, touching on the nature of God and what it means to be human. Secondly, Jesus is not a universalist. He says that it's those who are worthy who enjoy the resurrection from the dead. What does he mean by those who are worthy? We get just a glimpse if we read on into the beginning of the next chapter to what happens next: Jesus is in the temple and he sees people putting money in the collecting bowl. He sees people putting in their coinage, I suppose rich people. And he sees a poor widow who drops in two copper coins. Jesus says, commending her, she has given all she has - here is a person who will enjoy the resurrection from the dead. Thirdly, Jesus says that those who are raised become spiritual, not physical beings. They take on a totally new and different order of existence. Not the physical carbon-based existence, but the existence like the angels fit for heaven, for eternal life. For, he says, that the dead are not raised because of some sort of general belief in the immortality of the soul. No, people are raised from the dead because they're children of the living God, and the living God's love for his children is stronger than death.

Jesus clinches his argument. He quotes from the part of the Jewish scriptures that the Sadducees regard as fundamental. And he refers to their own hero, Moses. He says the fact that the dead are raised, Moses himself showed in the story about the burning bush where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive; all of them are alive. So the Scribes who believe in the resurrection of the dead exclaim, "*Teacher, you've spoken well.*" - He's one of us.

Now this confrontation took place during the last few days of Jesus's life. Before the week is out, he will have put his own words to the test by surrendering himself to crucifixion,

trusting that God would raise him from the dead into a different order of existence by the power of a love stronger than death. And the Scribes will have colluded with the Sadducees in putting Jesus to death. If we read on from our passage, we quickly see, and they quickly see that actually Jesus is not one of them either.

Is Jesus one of us?

There's a curious incident in the book of Joshua in the Old Testament: the Israelite army is about to lay siege to Jericho and their leader Joshua is by himself when a lone figure with a drawn sword confronts him. Joshua asks him, *"Are you for us or are you for our enemies?"* Are you one of us? Are you friend or foe? And the man replies, *"Neither. But as commander of the army of the Lord have I now come?"* Whereupon Joshua bows down to the ground and worships him. Are you one of us or one of them? Some see this mysterious figure as the archangel Michael, others as a prefigurement of Jesus the Messiah.

There is of course, a very real and very important sense in which Jesus is one of us: he's one of us in our humanity so that he might die as one of us, reaching on the one hand to the very depths of our humanity while at the same time holding on to the throne of God's mercy. The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this, *"He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make a sacrifice of atonement (or at-one-ment) for the sins of the people. To build a bridge between heaven and earth."* Between the lowest that we can get to, to the highest and the highest heavens. He died with us so that we might live with him in the love of the living God.

But Jesus is not one of us in the sense of being on our side like an invisible player in a Hull City shirt rather than, say, a Huddersfield Town shirt. No, he's on the Lord's side and the football boot is on the other foot. He challenges us, *'Are we on his side? Are we one of him?'* We try to pin on to Jesus our badge: Sadducee; Scribe; Evangelical; Liberal; Catholic; Socialist; Conservative. We claim him for our nationality, our religion, and I suppose if you could get away with it, we'd claim him as one of us, as a Yorkshire Man.

But he won't wear it. He won't wear it. He asks us. He asks you. He asks me, *"Are you one of me? Follow me."* The scribes and the Pharisees said, "Not on your life."

Reading Texts

2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-end

¹ As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one* is revealed, the one destined for destruction. ⁴ He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. ⁵ Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?

¹³ But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. ¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Luke 20:27-38

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man* shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.' ³⁴ Jesus said to them, 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶ Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'