

This week as I've been thinking about today's gospel,
the wider Church has been bouncing around in my head.

Maybe it's because we had an Archbishop of Canterbury with us last Sunday,
or maybe it's because we had diocesan council this weekend,
but whatever the reason the wider Church has been on my mind,
and it got me imagining a funny little reworking
of the Sadducees' question to Jesus.

Now, for it to make sense when I tell it, you need to remember
that the Church is sometimes referred to as The Bride of Christ.

Okay, here it is:

Some cynics, who say there is no resurrection,
asked Jesus a question about the so-called Bride of Christ.

"Teacher, for a long time you only had one bride. Imperfect, but unified.
Then, after 1,000 years your bride split into two brides,
the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

500 years later it split again, or more accurately it shattered
into all kinds of different Protestant Churches.

In 1534, the English Church broke away from the Roman Catholic Church.
For years those Anglicans prided themselves
on being the Church of the Middle Way,
but even they splintered again and again.

In 1776 the Anglicans in America broke away
and became the Episcopal Church.

Followers of John Wesley broke away and called themselves Methodists.

In 1873 a group left The Episcopal Church to be
the Reformed Episcopal Church.

In 1921 another group left to form the African Orthodox Church,
and in 2009 it splintered yet again when
the Anglican Church in North America was founded.

These kinds of divisions happen all over the world
and now there are thousands of different Churches.”

“So, teacher, if the Church is the Bride of Christ,
in the resurrection who will you be married to?”

Hold onto that question for a minute.

+ + +

There’s this teacher of early church history, a guy named Bertie Pearson,
who says heresy is NOT when you say something
new or different about God.

Heresy is NOT coloring outside the lines with your doctrine,
or thinking outside the box, or whatever cliché you want to use.

Heresy is actually trying to put your understanding of God IN a box.
Heresy is trying to make God comprehensible,
trying to say that the mind and power and works of God
are something that humans can wrap their mind around.

Put another way, if you can describe a puzzle or situation
that you think is beyond the power of God -
like a woman married to 7 brothers,
like a church splintered into a thousand pieces -
THAT’S when you’re speaking heresy.

+ + +

In today's gospel a group of Sadducees spoke heresy
when they tried to outsmart Jesus' talk about resurrection.

See, the Law of Moses had a rule about marriage.

In their patriarchal society
a provision was made to protect the lives of widows
(and also the estate of their dead husbands)
by having them marry their husband's brother.

So the Sadducees came up with a hypothetical:
if a woman were "given" in marriage to 7 different brothers:
in the resurrection whose wife will she be?

The trap they're trying to set is one where Jesus gives an answer
that either violates the Law of Moses,
which would make him sound like a fraud,
or an answer that admits the resurrection can be defeated
by human situations.

Jesus, of course, is having none of it.
He exposes their thinking as heretical because they believe
the work of God is limited by the rules they call the Law of Moses,
as if all that God were capable of doing could be contained,
could be legislated into submission.

But Jesus tells them about God's freedom to do
whatever God wants, whenever God wants -
God's freedom to overcome any situation
those Sadducees could imagine.

And notice that it's not just about the freedom OF God,
it's also about the freedom that comes FROM God,
the freedom to transcend the limitations
we humans put on ourselves
when we try to make the best of our imperfect lives.

God is not bound by the divorce laws in Torah,
just like in the age to come the woman in the story
will not be bound by the laws that see her as the possession of others.

Now, how will that work exactly? No idea!

We only know that God is trustworthy, and merciful, and good,
and that we will be with him in eternity.

+ + +

So, assuming none of you here have been married 7 times,
let me suggest a couple of ways the freedom OF God
and the freedom that comes FROM God
might be relevant to us.

The first way take us back
to my little story about the splintered Bride of Christ.

There is no HUMAN way our broken, splintered Church
will ever be whole again.

Not in The Episcopal Church, not in the Anglican Communion,
not in the Church Catholic.

Division...is part of our fallen nature.

But God will not be defeated by our human failings.

Our divisions will not outmaneuver the power of the Holy Spirit
to lead the Church into truth, and one day, the last day,
Christ WILL welcome his faithful, unified bride into his loving arms.

+ + +

The second way this story might have some relevance is more personal,
and is something I'd wager most of us here have wondered about
at some point in our lives.

What awaits us after death? WHO awaits us after death?

In the age to come, will I see the people I love?

Will I be with my beloved?

Will I see my mother or father again, my sister, my brother? My child?

Sometimes we talk pretty freely

about being reunited with those we love in eternity.

But will we really be with them again? How would that even work?

And what if I had two great loves of my life? What then?

Or what about those people we wanted to love,

but couldn't because of some old hurt or betrayal?

Will they be healed in eternity, or will I?

Will I forget the pain that separated us,

or will I be forced into a reunion I'm not sure I want?

+ + +

Maybe all this sounds silly to you,

but let me assure you it's not silly to a lot of us here,

not silly to a lot of us who have walked with death in our lives,

who have lost not only those we loved deeply,

but also those we had deeply complicated

or deeply broken relationships with.

Through this weird little resurrection debate with the Sadducees,
Jesus is telling you two things you can trust.

The first is that just because you can't imagine how something can happen,
it's not beyond the power of God to do it.

God has promised you life eternal,
has promised a home prepared not just for you
but also for those you love (in my Father's house are....)

God has promised that both you and they will be perfected in eternity,
that both you and they will one day be made more and more
into the likeness of Christ.

What does that look like? There's just no way we can conceive it.
But God can. Put your whole trust in his grace and love.

+ + +

The second thing God is telling you about resurrection this morning
is that you will be free.

Free from death, free from the sin that has divided us in this life,
and free from the compromised, damaging things
we do to ourselves just to get by in this world.

God is FOR you.

God is FOR you, resurrection is real, and God HAS prepared a place for you.

Trust in the Lord.

Amen.