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A NEW WORLD

Luke 20: 27-40

Who was this woman in our gospel reading? Who was this woman who had been through 7 weddings and 7 funerals? Who was this woman who was unable to have children? Well, as far as the Sadducees were concerned, such questions were irrelevant. It didn't matter who this woman was. It didn't even matter if she was real. What mattered was the legal and moral problem her situation posed. Society then was far less egalitarian. People were separated according to race, status, and gender. Depending on your family, your economic circumstances, your racial background, and your gender, you were given a certain position in society. And depending on your position, you could do some things and not others. You had certain rights and privileges and not others. If you were a woman, for instance, you could not work outside the home (at least not any legitimate work) and you could not own property. You depended on the men in your life: your father, and later your husband, and if your husband died you depended on your sons or a future husband.

Now even though Jewish moral law accepted this inequality of status between men and women, it did make some provision for women. If a husband died, it was important not to leave a wife destitute. Any existing brother of her husband not married was obliged to marry her and provide for her and provide offspring for his dead brother. Of course, there was no question here of love. It was a question of property rights and inheritance. The Sadducees ask Jesus: in the resurrection, whose wife will she be? In other words, to whom will she belong?

Their concern is one of legality. They are out to disprove the existence of an afterlife. If there is an afterlife, will it not cause considerable confusion if there is conflict over who owns what property and possessions according to what's been accumulated in this life? Sadducees were theological conservatives of the narrow-minded variety. They only believed in the first 5 books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. There is nothing in these books that speaks about the resurrection from the dead or an afterlife. Therefore, they thought it was fake news. And since Sadducees were also among the religious elite of Jewish society, they were out to score some political points by getting Jesus tripped up theologically. He was a threat to

their power, for the more people listened to him and followed him, the more they would lose their grip of power and control over the people.

‘So Jesus, if you think you know all the answers and if you think you’ve got a direct line to God, you tell us: whose property will this woman be in the afterlife?’ They might as well have been talking about a piece of furniture.

Jesus, on his part, gives them an answer they could not expect. And they could not expect Jesus’ answer because Jesus doesn’t share their perspective. Jesus challenges them to imagine a world not like this one, but rather, a world totally different to this one. Jesus doesn’t just tackle their faulty theology, but their distorted world view. As far as he is concerned, heaven is not a continuation of the way things are done here. Rather, heaven is about a whole new world based on a whole new way of thinking and living. What does this mean?

Let us begin where Jesus would begin, not in theological ideas but in human life. For according to Jesus’ perspective as it shines throughout the gospels, this woman is no piece of property. She is a human being. The kind of world that makes of her a legal problem is an obscene kind of world. The kind of world that makes of her someone who is of lower status than a man, one who cannot claim the means to her own independence in the face of tragic loss, one who cannot choose whom to marry and the expectations she should have in relation to a spouse, such a world cannot be projected onto the afterlife. As far as Jesus is concerned, heaven is not about transplanting our present world with a few improvements here and there. Nothing less than a whole new world will do.

Imagine, says Jesus, imagine a world where there is no need to feel so helplessly dependent, where marriage for the sake of survival is no longer necessary, where people are not treated unequally in terms of their rights, freedoms and obligations. In short, Jesus is saying, unless you can imagine and believe in a totally new world, you cannot understand what heaven, or an afterlife are about.

Unless you are committed to going against the grain of the way things are done here, unless you are outraged by the evil and suffering that happens here as a result of inequalities and dependencies that dehumanize and degrade people, unless you begin to appreciate the human lives that are

affected by your ideas and values... unless you do this, you haven't got the faintest idea of what heaven is about or what afterlife people of true faith are hoping for.

Of course, all of this was missed by the Sadducees. The farthest any of them came was to recognize that Jesus had scored a political point. 'But no fear,' they thought. 'If we can't silence him in verbal debate, we'll silence him in a way that really counts.' This debate took place during holy week, the last week of Jesus' life. 'We'll see how real the resurrection of the dead is. We'll see if heaven or the afterlife are real after we deal with him!'

But before we dismiss the Sadducees as morally degenerate people from the perspective of love, we must, at least, respect their realism. They knew what was real. Political and economic power were real. That's why they lobbied and fought for it. What happened in this world and what you ended up with, this was real. It was a world where war, violence and fear ruled. Control was the name of the game and domination over those who were a threat was the only security and peace you could hope for. 'Don't tell us about some new world, some dream world up in the clouds, Jesus. You may fool soft-headed, illiterate, down-and-out losers who have nothing left to hope for, but don't peddle this stuff to us. We've got the power now; we don't need to hope for it in the afterlife.

But Jesus' talk of a new world was not just pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. Otherwise, why would he be such a threat? Jesus' talk of a new world was also an incentive to rise up and change this world. For only a greater vision of a new world agitates us to struggle to change this world we're living in now. Jesus was no utopian dreamer disconnected from reality. Jesus believed God's kingdom was coming and God's will would be done on earth among those who believed in a heaven. If your faith in heaven or the afterlife is just about running away from all the suffering and pain that goes on in this world, your faith is flawed fundamentally.

Jesus' proclamation of a new world ruled by God was a spur to revolution beginning with the human heart. When I believe in a heaven ruled by God, I am motivated to resist the vicious cycles of action and reaction motivated by hate and revenge in this world. When I believe in an afterlife ruled by God, I am motivated to do my part in the name of compassion and concern for others here and now, rather than close myself off in my indifference or retreat into

my own selfish gratification oblivious to the struggles around me. Jesus' vision of a new world is no dream world. It motivates me to advocate, protest and care because I believe I am part of a larger eternity seeking to make a difference here and now.

But finally, believing in a new world as opposed to just this world with a few improvements, is about honouring the suffering and the dead. The whole belief in heaven and the afterlife increased in intensity as Israel's suffering as a people increased. Hebrews saw their fathers and sons slaughtered and their mothers and daughters taken into degrading slavery. Many reacted by going mad, while others went catatonic in despair. But there were some inspired by the prophetic imagination who were granted a spiritual vision of a new world, a heaven. And this vision did not send them into a dream state. Rather it renewed their spirits and re-invigorated their inner fight to resist. And in the best moments, it opened them up to a new flowering of compassion fuelled by a hope for a heaven they believed without question God would usher in, in the fullness of time. Heaven would come down to earth and heaven and earth would be one – 'thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' Jesus taught us to pray.

And it took no less of a faith to believe that Jesus was the one in whom such faith would find fulfilment. For Jesus didn't just talk about a new world in heaven or the afterlife. He also declared that this new world had already begun to invade this world through his ministry of spiritual restoration and renewal. Jesus came to feed hungry hearts and thirsting spirits with the kind of inner transformation that would begin to really change the world but change it in ways the rest of the world would rarely recognize. For who can really see the hidden current of peace growing in a person? Who can really appreciate the miracle of faith unless one knows such faith from the inside? Who can really recognize the power of love touching, healing, and changing others unless they know something of this power of love working in them? Jesus may have been preaching a new world that he knew was more real than anything in this world, but unless his listeners were ready to listen with spiritual hunger and thirst, such a vision would overwhelm them rather than motivate them to change the world beginning with change in themselves.

And, when all is said and done and when we consider seriously with our hearts and minds all the hurt and suffering that we have lived this past century; and when we remember all those who have died before us in the

name of sacrifice for a greater peace in time of war, or all who have died as innocent bystanders caught up in conflicts and wars not of their choosing, for no reason but hate and greed... If we really take all this to heart, is it more worthwhile to believe in a world which a few improvements here and there could fix, or is it far more satisfying and motivating to believe in a totally new world where God's will of infinite love will be sovereign? I choose the latter.

But, of course, it's one thing to imagine such a new world and it's quite another to really believe in such a world. True faith is not a matter of human effort. It must grow from within you. You need to be given the spark somehow and then you need to nurture it. It is a mystery and a gift. But once faith does grow and blossom, it can have powerful results akin to resurrection from the dead. In this time of Covid... In this time of democracy in crisis down south... in this time of anything is true and right if we say it is and are willing to enforce it... In this time, we need the gift of faith in a new world, in a heaven seeking to invade our earth, more than ever. And we... you and me, must be the ambassadors, the emissaries, the disciples and missionaries of the divine... the hands, feet and heart of our risen Christ in the world, especially now... Amen.