
Like the Angels

Luke 20:27-38

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 7, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The actor Tom Baker tells the story of how he was once at a party. He was being his gregarious self, regaling anyone who'd listen with tales from his days on stage, in the movies and especially on the TV. He felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned round to see a woman about his own age whom he vaguely recognized. Her eyes contained a depth of emotion he couldn't immediately account for. She said, "Tom!" He paused, feeling something deep and personal was required of him – but not able to tell quite what. He replied, searching the outer reaches of his thespian memory, "Were we *in* something together?" The woman said, crestfallen, "We used to be married."

It's easy to dismiss this story as the far-fetched anecdote of a celebrity living a Bohemian lifestyle. But if we let it pierce our conscience for a moment, we quickly become deeply uncomfortable. Uncomfortable, because it portrays perhaps our worst nightmare about marriage. Sure, violent marriages are a living hell for those many who endure them. Sure, betrayal is devastating. Sure, spouses and former spouses can make us unspeakably angry and it's possible to build up an unassailable wall of resentment at how it seems one has shaped one's whole life to accommodate or advance one's spouse's wellbeing or reputation. But Tom Baker's story displays an even greater nightmare: imagine giving your body and soul to another person, showing them the heart of your being and walking beside them in sunshine and rain – and then finding some years later that they'd completely forgotten you. You'd become utterly invisible to them. You didn't even register in their social memory. It's hard to think of a more deflating experience, not just for the ego, but for one's whole trust in the power of human relationship.

If you think Tom Baker is too upsetting to your sense of love and permanence and real relationship, you might want to think twice about paying too much attention to Jesus. Like Tom Baker, Jesus is in a busy place, surrounded by people, in this case the Jerusalem temple; and like Tom Baker's former wife, the Sadducees tap Jesus on the shoulder and say something that's supposed to knock him sideways. The two things you need to know about the Sadducees are that they only recognized the first five books of the Bible and they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, which they took to be a doctrine revealed only by later scriptures. So they try to expose Jesus' lack of scriptural faithfulness by showing the absurdity of belief in life after death. If a woman marries a man, they propose, and on his death marries his brother, and on and on as many as 7 times, which one will she be married to in the resurrection? Hey?

What's Jesus going to say? His reply knocks *us* sideways and makes Tom Baker's dialogue with his former wife seem small fry. Why? Because Jesus blows away our conventional notions of both marriage and life after death. First of all he says "those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead." That's a bit of a shock to any who might imagine life after death is some kind of guaranteed shoo-in. Jesus isn't talking about the immortality of the soul. He's talking about God raising people from the dead. But not everybody, apparently. And then look at what he says about them. "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." So, no wedding bells in heaven, then. Jesus cites Moses as his authority about the resurrection, which silences the Sadducees because the passage he refers to lies at the heart of the first five books of the Bible. That's all very well for the Sadducees, but what about us? We've just had our soft-focused ideals about marriage and life after death blown away – and we're supposed to be happy about it? How do Jesus' words qualify as good news?

Let's start by asking, What is marriage for? In the Sadducees' world there is one thing above all else that marriage is for. Marriage is for perpetuating the male line through the controlled production and rearing of male heirs. Marriage has other social purposes. In a patriarchal world marriage protects a woman from

isolation, vulnerability and exploitation in a society in which she can't be an independent earner and property owner. But there's no pretending marriage exists mainly for women in this story of the bride and the 7 brothers. She becomes the property of one brother after another, and she's never more than a means to an end, that end being to produce a son.

But Jesus is saying this isn't what resurrection looks like. Resurrection isn't something we can bring about by conceiving and rearing children and grandchildren. Resurrection is something only God can give, and, by giving it, God transforms marriage. Because marriage and the bearing of children are no longer necessary for human survival. There is no human survival after death. Instead there is real death and astonishing resurrection. And in every case that resurrection is not our human achievement but the gift of a gracious God. This means women don't exist to bear children. It means children don't exist simply to fulfil the frustrated dreams and projections of their thwarted parents. It means human beings don't exist simply to propagate themselves.

This is good news because it is news of liberation. Women's lives need no longer be defined by their degree of usefulness to men. Having children becomes a vocation for some, rather than an obligation or a necessity for everyone.

Throughout the history of the church, marriage has always been a social reality that church authorities have to different degrees sought to bless, commend, encourage or control. In recent generations a number of factors have clustered together to change the context of marriage considerably. There was a time when people lived much shorter lives, and a long marriage was 20 or 25 years. There was a time when one pregnancy in five could end in the mother's death. There was a time when sexual relations led sooner or later to the conception of children, and so sex before or outside marriage was dangerous and socially subversive. There was a time when no woman could contemplate owning property or having an independent life or career. There was a time when the household was the primary center of economic activity and the welfare of the vulnerable. These things cemented marriages, for good or ill.

Those times are largely gone in the West. And few genuinely lament their passing. But that means the social and cultural scaffolding that used to support marriage has been more or less dismantled. When a friend calls you up and says, "You know, Sandy and I have been going through a rough time, and we're living apart just now," of course you say the usual things like, "I'm very sorry," and "You must both be really hurting right now," and, "I guess this has been coming for a long time and none of us ever realized it," and "Thank you for having the courage to call me up and tell me," and "Is there anything I can do to help?" But do you always hope and earnestly pray that they will find a way to get back together? I'm not sure that you always do. Friends and advisers tend to polarize between the duty-bound and idealistic, who say marriage is for life and once you're one flesh you can't ever become two again, and the pragmatic and protective, for whom it's all about the wellbeing of children and the cost of therapy and the construction of support networks. When a friend says to us, "I'm sorry Sam, I've tried, really I have, but I just can't do it anymore," do we really have it in us to say, "Yes you can?" More often than not, I rather doubt it.

Christians in every state of life – single, married, separated, divorced, married again, lay, monastic, ordained – every state of life, are all struggling to come to terms with today's reality that marriage isn't the necessity it once was, and so it has to be a constant choice. Couples need to make a constant choice to stay married, and to foster the conditions that help them thrive in marriage, rather than expect social gravity to do it for them. We live in a different era from that of the Sadducees, and the bride with the seven brothers.

And yet the curious thing is that marriage has just as powerful a hold on our imaginations as ever. It turns out there *is* a contemporary analogy through which Jesus' words speak as powerfully today as they did to the Sadducees. The Sadducees had constructed a world where having heirs meant you could transcend your own mortality and attain a kind of life after death. We have constructed a not-wholly-different world. We've made a world where we believe that if you wrap up all your feelings and desires and longings and joys and ecstasies into one yearning and project it all upon one person you can break through to a level of human experience

that goes beyond the mundane and the mortal and the temporal. That's the epitome of the advertiser's pitch, and the college freshman's dream, and the grandmother's tears at the reception dinner: that somehow a single relationship can break through the fragile, the failed and the ordinary to a higher plane of perpetual peak experience. It's the closest thing our culture gets to a conception of eternal life. Marriage becomes our passport to heaven, for different reasons from the Sadducees – but to the same extent. It's somehow supposed to take us onto a higher level of existence, emotionally, sexually, relationally. And when we focus all that expectation on one single relationship, it's not altogether surprising that, in a lot of cases, the relationship can't take it. And today, without the buttressing of cultural norms and socioeconomic necessities to hold things together, a lot of people are calling a friend to say, "I'm sorry. Sandy and I aren't going to make it."

Just because the whole of society doesn't come crashing down when a marriage comes to an end, that doesn't mean it's any the less devastating for the parties involved. Remember Tom Baker's former wife's reaction when he said, lamely, "Were we in something together?" It's a sense of not just your ego but everything you dream of and still want to aspire to being utterly crushed. If you focus every emotional atom in your being on one other person and your relationship, divorce is bound to feel like rejection, failure, and the death of hope – or, as one person described it, like being in a car crash every day for two years. In the poet's bitter words: "I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong." But see this: if we invest marriage with all our understandings of eternal life, then its failure literally means the end of the world.

And so hear again Jesus' words, "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, because they are like angels and are children of God." Hear these words for the first time – perhaps the first time ever – as tender and compassionate good news; possibly counterintuitive, but nonetheless genuinely good news. Gently detach from marriage the freight it can't finally bear. Don't expect it to provide you with immortality, either through multiplying descendants or through transcendent emotional experience. Look to God for what only God can give. Only God can give eternal life, only God can give transcendence, only God offer love that lasts forever. Treasure marriage not because it lasts forever – but *precisely because it doesn't*, and so it needs to be cherished and enjoyed and nurtured all the more.

Then, when we've stopped trying to make marriage a route to immortality, let it be what it truly can be. When Jesus describes everlasting life in this exchange with the Sadducees, he calls it being present to God. He says Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are present to God – so they must be living beyond death. Being present has two connotations – it means being in God's presence, and it means being in the present tense. Both of these apply. That's what eternal life is: being in God's presence, and being in the present tense – not just a past memory or a future hope.

And that's what marriage can truly be. Marriage means saying to one person, "We are going to be *present* to one another – emotionally, physically, mentally, in sorrow and joy, in sunshine and in rain. We are going to be present even though marriage reveals to us the worst in each other and prevents us from any longer hiding from the worst in ourselves. We together are going to live our lives in *God's* presence, always knowing that each of us belongs fundamentally first and forever to God. We are going to live together in the presence of those God may bring into our lives, as children or friends or dependents. And we are going to try to live in the present *tense* – not nostalgic or bitter or wistful about the past, nor naive or overinvested or controlling about the future." All of these intentions are crystallized in the most important word in the wedding ceremony, which is the word "cherish." It's not ecstasy. It's not easy. It's not heaven. But it is a worthy life project. It is a beautiful thing. And it is one significant way in which we can learn to be present to God.

Marriage may often not be heaven. It turns out Jesus says it was never supposed to be. But it can still be a training ground for heaven – a training ground for living life in God's presence, for being in the present tense, all the time. Because this is the gospel. Whatever we are – married, single, single again, married again – God in Jesus taps us, his beloved people, on the shoulder. And we, mystified and vaguely remembering something, mutter in reply, "Were we in something together?" And God, without a trace of self-pity, but with loving eyes,

meets us in our failure and feckless forgetfulness. He could say, in lament and bitterness, "We used to be married." But God doesn't say that. Instead, with a twinkle in the eye, God says, "Yes, we *are* in something together. And always will be. Forever."