

Experience

a sermon preached on the

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lections: Job 19:23-27a; Luke 20:27-38

The Sadducees, scholars agree, were the most conservative religious party. Their dispute even with other conservative religionists, such as the Pharisees, arises from their conviction that only the Torah, the so-called 'five Books of Moses' had authority. They were men of the book, in a way that would be perfectly comprehensible to moslems, and today's literalist-fundamentalist christian – nothing except what is in the book! Their absolute commitment to the Torah, and to its literal word, meant that, unlike the Pharisees, they could not accept the possibility of resurrection – since according to their literal interpretation of the Torah resurrection rates no mention. The text from the Torah which they use to prove their point and in order to trap Jesus, he deals with summarily and decisively, such that "they no longer dared to ask him another question."¹

Now the text itself is rather more interesting than we might at first think. But as always, it's what the doctrine-choppers have left out which is most interesting, in this instance it deals with what is to be done in the case of the man who refuses to marry his dead brother's wife.² "If he persists in saying, 'I have no desire to marry her,' then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and declare, 'This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' Throughout Israel his family shall be known as 'the house of him whose sandal was pulled off.'³ Now here's a Biblical text begging for a literal interpretation! One gets the feeling that this is the kind of Biblical text which the Monty Python crew must have been reading when they made *The Life of Brian*.

But may I recommend that it's worth reading on to the next two verses from Deuteronomy chapter 25: "If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals (or in the euphemistic rendering of the 'King James Version', 'secrets'), you shall cut off her hand; show no pity."⁴ Let that be a warning to all you wives! Given the current Anglican Communion interest in genitals I wonder if there'll be a 'bible study' on this text at next year's Lambeth Conference of bishops? This text does put rugby players at an unfair advantage – it's hard to see how rugby could work at all if genital seizing were banned! And the prohibition against pity is a nice touch too, don't you think?

Well, as even this light-hearted reading around the text used by the Sadducees – and I assure you, there's a whole lot more in Deuteronomy, not to mention Leviticus, to keep the Pythons in business for the next 100 years – even this amply demonstrates perhaps the most insidious and dangerous aspect of flat-earth literalist-fundamentalist puritan misuse of Scripture. There would be a certain integrity, I suppose, in taking *every single text* literally – much as the Amish in the United States endeavour to do. But being Biblically-faithful with only carefully-selected texts is not being faithful at all. Job's three 'friends' carefully select texts, for hours on end. "How long will you torment me," Job answers them, "and break me in pieces with words?"⁵

Job's cry gives us the clue to the real problem here, with Sadducees and all their descendants who peddle Biblical-literalist, purity religion. For this is religion which torments, and breaks people with words. This is not religion of love. Not words for love and for life, but words for breaking and torment. Moreover, words not bodies. Words, words, and yet more words, but no person. That is to say, what we

¹ Luke 20:40

² Deuteronomy 25:1-6

³ Deuteronomy 25:8-10

⁴ Deuteronomy 25:11-12

⁵ Job 19:2

have here is a reversal of God-with-us. What we have is dis-embodied words, texts without contexts and with without persons, weapons for assault, not the means of loving embrace. It would have been perfectly obvious to Jesus that the Sadducees had not the slightest concern for the welfare of the widowed woman.

We may wonder why a religious person elects to ignore the mysterious and exquisite humanity of another and assail them instead with dis-embodied torrents of mis-quoted words. Certainly fear, anxiety, envy, insecurity and defensiveness all play their part. Lest I fall into the trap of only seeing the speck in my brother's eye, at this point face I must face up to this unpalatable and uncomfortable truth about myself. It seems to me that the real problem, the crux of the matter is that I am terrified of actual experience. I want predictable experience over which I have some control, yes, preferably experience which I have the power to purchase and which supports my prejudices and ideologies – but not the raw, uncomfortable and uncontrollable experience of the wildness of God's creation, of "things too wonderful for me".⁶ And in my terror I desperately search for words, for creeds and dogmas, for rules and regulations, the apparent safety and security offered by texts. I imagine that my actual experience, my body, my personhood, so fluid and unsafe and largely-unknown and messy, which frightens the living daylight out of me, can be made safe and secure and tidy and predictable by the rigidity of the words.

Like Job's friends, I cannot cope with the shocking bodiliness of life in all its appalling beauty and mystery, and desperately grasp at words and yet more words in the vain attempt to make the unmanageable manageable. It is actual, bodily, enfleshed life, in all its messiness, unpredictability, exuberance and enormity which so terrifies me that I torment even myself and break myself into pieces with words. And what I do to myself I am likely to do to others as well. Experience, real and shocking bodily experience, is truly the problem. My dread reaction to the terror of experience is thus no different to the Sadducees.

Resurrection, Jesus teaches however, is life of an entirely different order to the tribal, familial and religious customs and regulations and dogmas packaged up in torrents of words which we cling to as security blankets. "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."⁷ Resurrection life, received and shared in the Body and Blood of Christ at his banquet table, is not a set of propositions, tidy words to keep us pure – but the liberation of persons in the mysterious and bewildering experience of real fleshy bodies, God-with-us. Just as eucharist is not a collection of words to be read in a book, so resurrection also is not a bunch of propositions, but experience, wild, untameable, and alive!⁸ Just as it is the *experience* of eucharist which transforms us, so too it is the *experience* we live in our bodiliness, of things too wonderful and terrifying for us, that is the way to the fullness of life for which we hope, which our tradition calls resurrection.

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⁶ Job 42:3
⁷ Luke 20:35
⁸ Luke 20:38