

Seek to grasp the various ways resurrection life is reflected in scripture

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Pentecost + 22- Haggai 1 15b-2 9, Ps 98, 2 Thess 2 1-5, 13-17, Luke 20 27-40

Today we find Jesus bailed up in a situation very like a hostile press conference. He's been *teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel* ^{Lk 20.1} when a group of officials arrive – chief priests, scribes and elders. They set out to publicly discredit Jesus with a series of trap questions. They first challenge his authority to teach at all. When he brushes that off, they try to trap him with a trick question about taxation, so he'll be either arrested for treason, or despised by his people. Now we've just heard the Sadducees' absurd question about marriage and resurrection.

The weird thing about these groups of religious officials is that they disagree with each other about the very issues they try to trip Jesus with. Sadducees shocked their compatriots by being quite easy with paying taxes to Caesar. They were the chief priests, and they controlled the Temple. They were hugely wealthy, and quite unpopular. Another disagreement these Sadducees had with Pharisees and other Jews is the reason they're described as they are today's Gospel. *Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, asked Jesus a question.* ^{v. 27} They didn't believe in resurrection, nor in the angels Jesus mentions in his answer to them.

Pharisees and Sadducees had disagreed about resurrection and angels for well over a century before Jesus' time. Sadducees believed only what they could find in the written Torah – the

first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures – which people call the books of Moses. Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection or angels because they couldn't find evidence of them in the Torah. So their question to Jesus begins, ^{v. 28} 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us'. They're literalists and the way they frame their question suggests they were quite pastorally challenged too.

The Pharisees – and Jesus – believed in resurrection and in angels. Alongside the written Torah, they used a parallel 'Oral Torah' – other teachings given to Moses and handed down to them by word of mouth and through Prophets and Psalms. In this Oral Torah, they found strong support for their resurrection beliefs, especially in the book of Daniel. So, this was something where Jesus and the Pharisees agreed. Even so, Jesus meets the Sadducees on their own turf – the written Torah – and in the burning bush story, shows the Sadducees there is evidence of life after death.

Jesus believed in resurrection and in angels, and this calls us to consider what we think. At All Souls last week, we thought about resurrection, and today, Job, the Epistle and the Gospel demand that we think a bit more about it.

I've often wondered what resurrected people will be like. Will we look old or young – or will we all look as if we're about 29? If so, then when we see old friends, will we recognise them? Will they recognise *us* without our wrinkles? When the risen Jesus appeared to his friends, some of them took quite a while to realise it was him. Magdalene in the garden didn't know until he said her name. His friends on the Emmaus Road didn't recognise him until he broke bread. And Thomas had to see the wounds of his crucifixion before he'd believe it was him.

The resurrected Jesus cooked and ate and drank with his friends; Magdalene grabbed hold of him in the garden. So, he was physically real. But then the Gospels also record him

passing through locked doors and appearing and disappearing to people long distances apart. If that's what we are to expect for ourselves, it all suggests that resurrected people will somehow be the same people, but different.

Today, we heard Jesus say we'll be like angels; children of God; immortal. And his way of reading the burning bush story says that God and the living Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were present to each other many hundreds of years after their earthly lives while God was speaking to Moses. So, does that mean our resurrected selves will be beyond time like God is – present to all time? Watch this space.

At All Souls we heard Paul's response to other people who couldn't accept the idea of resurrection from the dead. He was writing to Greek people, and so he wrote in terms that would make sense to them. He referred to the most widespread philosophy of his time-Stoicism. He talked about us being raised with 'spiritual bodies'; not resuscitated bodies like Lazarus. Stoicism speaks of spiritual bodies which are not ghosts; bodies that can change, and which can affect things.

Whether all this is more a comfort or a mystery, these ponderings make me read Job with fresh eyes when he says, *I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; ²⁶ and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, ²⁷ whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!*

There's a strong element of judgement in resurrection theology – including fire and brimstone imagery. But Jesus' recourse to the story of the burning bush makes me think in a different way about the image of fire that is so often used in judgement oracles and statements in scripture.

The burning bush, which *was blazing, yet it was not consumed*, makes me think differently from how I otherwise might about

John the Baptist's thundering warning earlier in Luke about the coming Messiah's judgement. *His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*' ^{3.17} The burning bush reference makes me imagine that we might similarly burn, but not be consumed. What there is of us that has no place in the Kingdom of God will doubtless burn away, but the essential person that God has imagined, created and sanctified will remain. But I hasten to add that this is just my speculation in an area of deep mystery – where I trust that grace and love overwhelmingly influence God's judgement.

It's a mystery, yes. And also, a comfort. It's important that we seek to grasp the various ways resurrection life is reflected in scripture and the experiences of Jesus' disciples over the millennia. It's various because we are all different. They present us with an extraordinary vision of freedom, connection, and hope that we can surely trust in God's endless love for all of us. Amen.