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Introduction

Sadducees come to Jesus to ask him a question about the issue of life after death. Jesus hears the question and he answers it, but it is also possible that he ‘reads the room’. What are the power games in questioning? Who holds the power, the questioner or the questioned? Read the story and see what you think is going on between Jesus and those asking him questions...

Text

Luke 20:27–38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but 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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

Comment

When I was an undergraduate student we used to play around with ethical dilemmas sometimes as a talking game. One of our favourites was the ‘Trolley Dilemma’. First conceived of in this format by English philosopher Philippa Foot the basis of the Trolley Dilemma is to choose whether to sacrifice one person or many people. The thought experiment was to imagine you were on a trolley heading to a set of points where the track divides, on one track was a group of people, and on the other a single person. The brakes are broken and you, the philosopher-trolley driver, must throw the lever and choose who to kill.

A bit like the question the Sadducees bring to Jesus the Trolley Dilemma is not real, it is a thought experiment to make the individual decide how moral decisions should be taken. In our student nights of talking it often became elaborated, or discarded, or an argument would break out. When we discuss abstract questions the underlying human relationships can sometimes improve, but also sometimes be strained.

I wonder what the atmosphere was in this conversation between Jesus and the Sadducees? Was it a cordial meeting of minds and exchange of views? Or was it heated or strained? We will never know. The answer Jesus gives is to place the reality of the after-life in God's hands. He talks of an inner reality God sees of those destined for the afterlife being 'like angels' and being 'children of God'. Both categories, the angel and the child, are outwith the social structures which include marriage in adult life.

Jesus answers the ethical dilemma with metaphor. He uses the ideas of the child of god and the angel as ways of explaining the soul which went beyond human marriage, and human convention. It may be that his answer suggests there is a reality to each of us which is more than our relationships. For those who want to see the cultural institution of marriage as essential to the Christian Faith this passage raises questions, as clearly Jesus is more concerned about the eternal nature of an everlasting soul than he is about the question which was actually put before him. How we choose to marry is of less consequence to Jesus than the choices we make which would bring the kingdom.

Of course, the moral philosophy student faced with the Trolley Dilemma is unlikely to pass if they answer only with metaphor. We assume Jesus was being quizzed on his spiritual wisdom, not his academic ability, but without a bit more information it is hard to know. Phillipa Foot, who wrote this version of the dilemma, did not let the fact it wasn't easily answered stop her becoming one of the early members of Oxfam, joining six years after that charity was formed. Not being able to answer every question didn't stop her putting her atheist ethics into practice to benefit others.

We are left asking ourselves how we sit with unanswered questions. Do we let the unanswered question deter us from action, or do we, like Philippa Foot, carry on and do what we can for the poor regardless? The Trolley Dilemma remains a useful tool for moral philosophers because it is not easy to answer. Were the Sadducees happy with the answer they received? We too will never know.

Response

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Think of an ethical dilemma you find personally difficult. How do we live with those hard to answer questions? Can we leave it with God, as Jesus does? Or do we need to feel that faith resolves all questions?

OR

Get a group together to run the Trolley Dilemma, keep it fun and remember it is simply a thought experiment. What do we learn about ethics. It is important also to ask what we learn about each other, and our relationships, as we chat through a

thought experiment like this.

Prayer

Unanswering God, who provides questions
from before the world was formed
and holds questions until the end of time,
enable us to be at one with our unanswered questions,
those that pierce the soul, those that tear the heart,
and give us faith in the mystery of eternal life
to let those unanswered questions rest with us
in this life, and carry them forward to the next life
with you.

AMEN

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Conflict Skills