

Sermon Like the Angels 06.11.16
Luke 20:27-38 (Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21)
St John's United Reformed Church Julian Templeton

The Sadducees present Jesus with a hypothetical scenario. The law requires that when one's sister-in-law is widowed and childless, the brother-in-law is required to marry her. The woman is married, in succession, due to their deaths and her childlessness, by seven brothers. Now, say the Sadducees—who do not believe in the resurrection and who present the hypothetical scenario for the purpose of lampooning it—whose wife will she be in the resurrection? What a humdinger! How will Jesus get out of this carefully laid trap?

Before we rush to criticise the Sadducees' cynicism, we might reflect on whether our attitudes to death are similar to theirs. In a 1995 survey of UK Churchgoers' beliefs about death and an afterlife, about a third surveyed believed that the immortal soul passes from the deceased; some 12% reckoned 'we come back as something else', a belief in reincarnation; only 8% believed that something—resurrection perhaps—might happen to the body. That survey would suggest that at least some of us, perhaps most of us, regard the very idea of a resurrected existence as absurd. Nihilism, the belief that death is total extinction, represented by sayings such as 'you only live once' and 'when you're dead, you're dead' is also an increasingly common belief. Nonetheless, in my experience, many people do have a belief in an afterlife in which they hope to be reunited with those they love.

For those who have remarried and believe in the life of the world to come, the hypothetical situation presented by the Sadducees is a relevant consideration. Will some of us be

doubly or triply married in the world to come? Just imagine the awkwardness and the arguments!

While, in one sense, we can but speculate about a state that none of us will experience until we die, as Christians we can at least try to inform our speculation by the indications that the New Testament gives us.

In his encounter with the Sadducees Jesus says two things that give us some pointers about the attitude we might take to death and what might lie beyond death. The first is his statement:

God is not God of the dead but of the living; to him all are alive. (20:38)

One way of attempting to make sense of this is to consider what it means to affirm that God is *eternal*. Where we experience time as a succession of events in which the past is available to us only in remembrance, the present is fleeting, and the future unavailable to us; for God it may be that before, during, and after exist all at once without one giving way to the other. And if this is so, then, for God, those who have died are not lost but are alive.

The second pointer that Jesus gives us is his comment that those who are resurrected:

...cannot die any more, because they are like angels (20:36)

Jesus's suggestion that the resurrected are 'like the angels' may not appear to give us much to go on, but it is at least something rather than nothing. The Bible has quite a lot to say

about angels. It is an angel of the Lord that speaks to Moses out of the burning bush. An angel of the Lord delivers the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. As we will soon recall during Advent and Christmas, angels have a central role in the story of Jesus's conception and birth. Angels are messengers of the Lord. They are sent to do the Lord's bidding. In the Letter to the Hebrews the authors state that, "Angels are sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation." (Heb. 1:14)

While Protestants have not paid a great amount of attention to angels—perhaps as a reaction others whom we think paid them too much attention—there is one Protestant theologian in the 20th century who wrote a surprising amount about angels, and that is Karl Barth. He devotes 160 pages in his multi-volume *Church Dogmatics* to the subject of angels.

Angels, according to Barth, are ambassadors of the Kingdom of Heaven. Angels are God's messengers whom he sends to announce and accompany the doing of his will. Angels are the servants of God and humans who victoriously ward off the forces of chaos.¹

The mission of angels is to praise and bear witness to God, making God's purposes open and clear to God's creatures on earth. While angels are sent to earth as messengers of God's will, their residence is with God in heaven. In heaven, the angels praise and bear witness to God. Heaven is a state in which God's will is accomplished, which may be origin of the phrase in the Lord's Prayer "Thy will be done on earth *as it is in heaven...*"

¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, 369 (the whole section is pp. 369-531),

If angels are witnesses and messengers of God's will, the question arises: do they have a will of their own? Barth believes that, unlike humans, they do not have a will of their own. Yet this seeming defect is at the same time a benefit, since it means that angels are completely open and transparent to God and thereby are immune from sin and its effects.

If angels are not affected by sin, as humans are, then this perhaps gives us the firmest steer towards what it is Jesus might have meant when he said that those who are resurrected will be 'like the angels'. While 'sin' is something hardly ever spoken about now, even in the Church; sin still has an essential function in describing all the ways in which things are 'not right' and 'tend to go wrong'. Even if we are reluctant to name something as 'sinful' anymore, we might nonetheless recognise feelings of *discontentment* and *frustration*.

I'm sure you know these feelings as well as I do: the feeling we get when things don't turn our right. Others make unreasonable demands of us and we lack the strength to say 'no'. We have good intentions but do not always carry them through; sometimes when we do carry them through they are misinterpreted or not appreciated. We regret some things we've done. We regret not doing other things we ought to have done. We have convictions but lack the courage to doing something about them. We wish we had more confidence but are often held back by worry and fear. We become upset by perceived slights. We upset and hurt others unintentionally. We passively collude in an economic system that keeps some rich and others poor. We become overwhelmed by responsibilities and put things off and procrastinate. As we grow older our bodies don't always do what we want them to do. These are all sources of discontentment and frustration. They are all, arguably, manifestations of sin or of our fallen

state. Their effect is to *diminish* us and *limit* the good we could do. The overall effect of sin and fallenness is that we are *less than* the people God intends us to be.

But what if becoming like the angels reverses the effects of sin and actually *enlarges our capacity to be the people God intends us to be*? For example, what if, when we are resurrected, we are able to love not only those whom we have loved on earth but also our *enemies*? What if in heaven we have no need of exclusive relationships any more but have our capacity to love so enlarged that we feel a sense of *communion with God and all other people*?

At present marriages and exclusive relationships and families fulfil an essential function of channelling one's libido and love for the purpose of procreation and stability. At present our capacity for friendship is limited, despite the large number of so-called 'friends' that some claim to have on *Facebook*! Birth and death and limitation characterise a world of time. But Jesus's comments that that resurrected people will 'not marry' and will be 'like the angels' steer us towards a totally different form of life: a life with what might be called 'enlarged capacities'.

It suggests, for example, that our, often, impaired ability to feel joy and elation and wellbeing will no longer be impaired. It suggests that the regret and self-consciousness that often hamper our enjoyment of life will be sloughed off and we will be able to experience total unselfconscious joy! It suggests that our physical bodies that deteriorate will be replaced with new spiritual bodies that perfectly match our personalities.

But the really good news in Jesus's pointer that the resurrected will be like the angels is not only the enlarged

capacities that we may have in the future, it is also the opportunity to enlarge our capacities *now*.

When Jesus proclaims that 'the kingdom of heaven has arrived' he is referring to a *present* reality. When Paul writes, "Outwardly we are deteriorating, but inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16) he refers to the present experience of the work of *God's grace in Jesus Christ* renewing the inner person. Grace is God's work of incorporating our imperfect humanity into Christ's perfect humanity.

Grace at work within us begins to enlarge our capacities now, giving us the strength to say 'no' when we need to do so; giving us the stamina to put good intentions into practice; giving us the courage of our convictions; giving us the patience and effort to understand those who hold markedly different opinions to us. In a nation and in a world where peoples are becoming divided and polarised over binary 'yes or no' issues, an *enlarged capacity to understand one another* is, perhaps, our greatest need. Greater understanding will certainly help, along with the ability not to get bogged-down in 'yes or no' binary issues but to 'lighten-up' where possible. GK Chesterton gives some useful advice about how we might begin to lighten-up:

One "settles down" into a sort of selfish seriousness; but one has to rise to a [happy] self-forgetfulness.

Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.²

² GK Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*