

**Pitt Street Uniting Church
Pentecost 12C – 09 November 2025**

**A Reflection by Christine Longfoot
Gospel - Gospel of Luke 20:27-38 – Is There an Afterlife?**

Good morning, Pitt Streeters, it's good to be with you again.

Thank you for your kind invitation to preach.

Let us pray.

“Lord Jesus,
take my mind and think through me,
take my mouth and speak through me:
above all, Lord Jesus,
take my spirit and pray in me”
Amen

Today's Gospel reading reminds me of a conversation I had with my mother.

A few years after my father's death, Mum began a relationship with a widower.

“Mum”, I said, “just suppose there is an afterlife and when you die both Dad and, let's call him Henry, are waiting for you. Which one will you go with?”

Mum smiled. “It doesn't concern me, I don't believe in an afterlife, so I don't have to worry about such things”.

A similar sentiment about the non-existence of an afterlife is being expressed by the Sadducees challenging Jesus in the Luke reading for this week. They're confident they've exposed the notion of resurrection for the stupidity they think it is.

Time for some context.

Luke 20:27-38 comes in the narrative of Jesus's final days in Jerusalem, where his ministry of bringing good news to the poor and freeing the oppressed will abruptly end with his crucifixion.

Jesus had attracted many followers, and both the Pharisees and Sadducees are feeling threatened and challenge Jesus on his interpretations of Judaism.

In the Gospels we see many instances of the Pharisees challenging Jesus, but in this passage it's the Sadducees that put Jesus to the test.

So, who were the Sadducees and what were their beliefs?

In Jesus' time, the Sadducees were an elite, wealthy, and conservative Jewish sect focused on the Temple and its rituals, largely composed of aristocratic and priestly families.

The Sadducees opposed Jesus primarily because he threatened their political power and status by challenging the established religious and economic order of the Temple. His actions and claims, especially his messianic and divine claims, and his cleansing of the Temple, were seen as a potential threat to the stability of their collaboration with the Romans, which could have led to a crackdown and jeopardized their positions and wealth.

They recognized only the Torah as fully authoritative. (Namely Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) and for this reason did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (as that is not referenced in the Torah).

The Sadducees tell Jesus a story about a woman who marries the eldest of seven brothers. He dies, and the second eldest brother marries her. He dies and the third brother marries her and so in the same way all seven marry the same woman and all brothers die childless.

Finally, the woman also dies.

Now for the question itself.

"In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the husband be? For the seven had married her."

It's a ludicrous question. It has echoes of Oscar Wilde, "To lose one husband may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose seven looks like carelessness,".

The specific scenario they raise involves "levirate marriage," described in Deuteronomy, in which the brother of a deceased man is to marry his brother's widow in order to produce a child who will perpetuate his brother's name.

In ancient Israel the passing on of the family name and inheritance within a tribe were vitally important. The practice was instituted as a means for the widow to have someone to support her and her children financially, and to keep her late husband's wealth within the family bloodline.

So how does Jesus respond to this "gotcha" question?

Jesus tells them they have completely missed the point. Yes, they have outlined the custom of Levirate marriage, which he is well-acquainted with. But that's not where the error in their argument is.

The Sadducees assume that resurrection life is of the same quality, or same order, as our present life. They expect people will marry, for example. Their argument depends on this. They are wrong, according to Jesus, because the life of the resurrection will be fundamentally different. "They neither marry, nor are given in marriage."

Jesus then strengthens his argument by referencing the Torah. “And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, long after their deaths.

And here’s the zinger, “for to him all of them are alive”.

Jesus' answer is praised by the Sadducees. “Teacher, you have spoken well.”

So that’s today’s gospel story. And the take home message is that every single one of us will continue in the living memory of God.

In that sense, we will continue to live.

But, like the Sadducees, I suspect that there are many of us who have questions about an afterlife.

Do you think there is an afterlife?

For me, historian Manning Clark put it best when he said, he had a “shy hope”.

I must confess there is a tiny part of me that envies the certainty of Fundamentalist Christians.

It’s there in John 3;16.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

So it’s a question of belief, end of story. No wrestling with the question, just believe.

I well remember when, as a thirteen-years old, I decided church wasn’t for me. I had a question for our elderly Presbyterian minister.

“Can you only go to heaven if you believe in God?’ I asked.

“That’s correct”.

“Well, Mum says she’s an atheist and Dad says he’s an agnostic, and I know both of them won’t change their minds. So, if they can’t go to Heaven, what’s the point of me going, I’m still a kid and I need my parents!”.

Needless to say, I started to stray from the church, deciding to just attend fellowship.

I returned to the church, here in Pitt St actually, with my late husband, when we first heard of Progressive Christianity.

Progressive Christianity had room for folks like me, who had doubts, but along with those doubts mystical experiences, described by the late theologian Marcus Borg as “The More”.

Now is an appropriate time to quote Marcus Borg on the subject of an afterlife.

“And it’s not very much about what happens after death. It’s not that all progressive Christians are sceptical about an afterlife, but for me, anyway, I’m very happy to leave what happens after death up to God. And then beyond that, I have no idea how anybody can *know* what happens after death, and you can’t *make* something true by believing it. So, if somebody says, “I believe in Heaven,” fair enough, you believe in Heaven, but that has *nothing* to do with whether or not there *is* one.

And so, the energy of progressive Christianity is not about believing something now for the sake of a reward later, or not even about being virtuous now for the sake of a reward later, but for being as completely present as possible to *this* life, and being open to the moving of the Spirit both within ourselves and our society.

We should say this. We should be upfront and say that in the beginning and before anything else, resurrection is a trust in the love of God. If we only hope for a better life for the world and live for that, we believe in the resurrection.”

This quote suggests to me Instead of being obsessed with future rewards, the text challenges us to live with the "already and not yet" mindset. We can pursue the values of the coming age—like love, justice, and community—in our present lives.

To this end, I’m so glad I took my 78 years old arthritic spine across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in August in the “March for Humanity”. Thousands and thousands of people of every faith and none, moving as one, saying killing, especially of children, is wrong. Genocide is wrong.

And do you know that it felt for just one Spirit-filled moment, that we had achieved on that march what Christians pray for every single Sunday. The Kingdom of God, as it is in Heaven, was here on Earth.

To conclude, let the afterlife take care of itself. Recognize that God is a God of the living. Focus on what brings life to ourselves and others. This can be interpreted as a call to build community, act with compassion, and pursue justice, as these are all things that echo the life-giving nature of God.

Amen.