**SERMON LUKE 20:27-38,**

**6 November 2022**

Shortly after my father died relatives started gathering at our family home to offer their condolences. One cousins husband who was a devout Mormon said to me with all sincerity. “the one regret I have for your dad, is that I never got an opportunity to take him and your mum to the Mormon temple to have their marriage sealed for all eternity? Believe you me, he was serious. I just looked at him as a Presbyterian minister with unbelief thinking what planet are you on? That is the last thing our father would have wanted he did not tolerate religious door knockers and was a man strong and firm in his own Christian value and faith and Mormonism was most definitely not one of them. Dad had his own Christian views and values about life after death and he didn’t need someone from a different faith perspective telling him what was good for him.

Married for all eternity a Mormon latter-day saint belief, couples are encouraged to go to the Mormon tabernacle or temple to have their marriages sealed for all eternity. When my mum died we all said that now her and dad were together again and this makes us happy. That’s our Christian belief that we will be reunited at death. But the question is what if you don’t want to be reunited at death.

Being married to one or two people your whole life many of us can relate to, but being married to several over a life time and all of them brothers is perhaps something we can only imagine. In the event of their deaths, who would you actually be married to in the afterlife? If your partner was an abusive horrible person whilst living, why would you want to be reunited with them after death? This case that Jesus had been given was a trick question for him.

According to the Old Testament, levirate marriage is enacted as a law in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 strictly requiring the levir to perform the duty of marrying his brother's childless widow. The widows Tamar and Ruth are perhaps seen as two examples representing the fulfilment of the levirate practice in the Old Testament.

In ancient Israel, even though widowhood was not something people were praying for, when it came, the people involved were protected by the legal and customary structures already in place. One of those structures in the Old Testament is the institution of the levirate marriage where the right and the possession due to a widow without a son for her late husband could be protected and appropriated. A similar custom was also found amongst the pre-colonial Yoruba people through the widow’s inheritance which guarantees the welfare of the widow after the demise of her husband. However, these structures have been dismantled by Christianity, thereby exposing the majority of present-day widows to untold hardship.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In levirate marriage, a man’s widow is inherited by his brother or other male relative. Statistics of its prevalence are limited, but this customary practice has long existed in Africa, including Kenya (Agot 2007), Nigeria (Doosuur and Arome 2013), Sudan (Stern 2012), Uganda (Ntozi 1997), and Zambia (Malungo 2001). This practice appears antisocial as it treats females as property and thus violates their human rights. Therefore, UN Women, the UN entity dedicated to gender equality and women’s empowerment, considers it similar to “other forms of forced marriage” and states that “Laws should prohibit and punish all forms of wife inheritance” (UN Women 2011b).

However, this practice has also anecdotally been seen as an informal safeguard for widows, as it enables them to stay in the extended family of their deceased husband (clan) with their children and take advantage of family property (e.g., house and land). Indeed, some widows require the protection of levirate marriage, as they traditionally have limited rights to the property of both their natal and their husband’s families. Additionally, in societies with clan exogamy (i.e., marriage with those outside one’s own clan) and patrilocal residence, women often move some distance away from their natal village to their husband’s village at time of marriage. This means that a widow’s close relatives (e., biological parents and siblings) typically live away from her current residence and, thus, cannot easily provide her with adequate protection. Therefore, levirate marriage provides widows with an alternative form of material support and social protection.

Interestingly, the widow’s deceased husband’s clan also requires levirate marriage. Many African societies with succession passed down along the male line place a great emphasis on generational continuity (e.g., Caldwell and Caldwell 1987; Tertilt 2005). Therefore, these clan members seek to prevent widows from leaving their husband’s home with the sons of the deceased. Additionally, the clan members of the deceased may even hope that the widow will produce more sons with male relatives of the deceased. Therefore, levirate marriage enables the clan to keep the sons of the deceased within its extended family, and thus, to continue the generations. Here, the clan protects the widow as the caretaker of those sons.

In this gospel narrative Jesus has been handed a case involving the complexities of levirate marriage, that patriarchal institution that protected women by passing them from brother to brother. Levirate marriage practice specifies that a man's widow must marry his surviving brother in order to continue the relationship between their respective groups that was initiated in the original marriage. Levirate marriage is mentioned in the Bible as a standard marriage regulation among the ancient Hebrews. Jesus says that in the aeon to come, the aeon of resurrection and restitution, the whole institution of marriage will be unnecessary, and thus women will not be passed along as property. Why? Because, as Jesus says in Luke 20:36, in that aeon, people “are not able to die.” Why would that matter? It appears that Luke’s Jesus understands the aeon of resurrection and restitution to have set aside the entire patriarchal structure that makes the possessing of women as property possible or (perhaps) necessary because of our mortal weakness.

We are entering the ancient culture of male and female and the values which determined their relationships. The values reflect a male-dominated society. Marriage was a crucial element in maintaining stability. That stability was related to the family and extended family. You married someone in the extended family, not an outsider. Bearing children was important to sustain the family. Families were their own welfare system, their own economies. Sexuality was a key component. Marrying outsiders or having children by outsiders produced unstable offspring. Sexual behaviour must be closely monitored. Women must be guarded. They bore the children, which was a blessing if they belonged and a curse if they came from outside or were unable to bear children. This is the background of the Sadducees’ ‘case’.

The Sadducees appear to have been the more culturally sophisticated of the identified movements among Jews at the time. Their followers tended to be among the leading priestly families and the aristocracy. Their approach to scripture was more conservative than that of the Pharisees. Many of their stricter interpretations coincided with those we find in the sectarian writings among the Dead Sea Scrolls, so much so that some argue that these writings were from Sadducees. More likely they come from similar priestly classes and reflect sides taken in disputes that reached back 200 years.

Perhaps Jesus’ original answer was quick and sharp: ‘God is not God of the dead but of the living’ (20:38a; Mark 12:27). At one level it is no answer at all, if you think the dead remain dead. At another level it is saying that to claim God is god of the living must include that God’s care extends to those who have died in a way that they cannot really be dismissed as dead. Jesus is operating with a theology of God which says: even in death God is with us and therefore we must be with God and so: we must be going to exist! His thought is in the context of resurrection: we will be raised to life.

It states that in the resurrection life there will be no marriage and no sex. Such an understanding was widespread. Luke’s expansion seeks to strengthen the argument by noting that no reproduction is necessary, because people will not die. Behind that is an assumption, common in his day, that sex is for the purpose of procreation, usually associated with a value system which saw the act of sex just for pleasure or for mutual enjoyment and love as an indication of moral depravity.

Such an understanding of the life to come was relatively widespread in the Christian movement from early days and probably explains why some chose to live in the present the way they would live in the age to come.

The main focus of the passage, however, is God. God is the certain detail which hope has. The rest one might add is speculation or imagination. Ultimately it is faith in a God who loves which forces the issue, despite the intellectual difficulties which are no less today than then. Somehow God continues to care so that there is also no end to being the focus of that care. Such a theology forces an agnosticism about death. The same theology needs to re-engage issues of sexuality and the values which have controlled it. Amen

[[2]](#endnote-2)

1. Samson O. Olanisebe; Olusegun A. Oladosu. Levirate marriage amongst the Hebrews and widow’s inheritance amongst the Yoruba. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bill Loader Lectionary Resources. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)