The Gospel according to Luke 20: 27-40

**27**Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him **28**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. **29**Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman and died childless; **30**then the second **31**and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. **32**Finally the woman also died. **33**In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

**34**Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage,  **35**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. **36**Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. **37**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. **38**Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.”

This is the Gospel of Christ

**Please be seated**  
In this story, Jesus is once again challenged. Now, it is the Sadducees. Unlike the scribes and chief Priests who are often portrayed as morally and religiously corrupt, the Sadducees were the wealthy upper class, who were involved with the priesthood and their lives revolved around the Temple. The religious responsibilities of the Sadducees included the maintenance of the Temple in Jerusalem. Their high social status was reinforced by their priestly responsibilities, as mandated in the Torah. The priests were responsible for performing sacrifices at the Temple, the primary method of worship in ancient Israel. This included presiding over sacrifices during the three festivals of pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Their religious beliefs and social status were mutually reinforcing, as the priesthood often represented the highest class in Judean society. However, Sadducees and the priests were not completely synonymous. Not all priests, high priests, and aristocrats were Sadducees; many were Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, whereas the Pharisees did. Consequently, they were not exactly blood brothers in their beliefs, and were often in conflict.

Unlike the Scribes and Chief Priests who sent spies to try and trap Jesus, the Sadducees had the gumption to come directly to him. The Sadducees presented a case which presumes the improbability of this life affecting the next one. To illustrate their argument, they pointed out that according to the custom of the day, the rule regarding levirate marriage stipulated that if people remarried and the man died without leaving a son, the woman was to marry the man’s next oldest brother. The presented a case that if the woman ends up being married to seven brothers, and all men die childless, then the woman dies, who is to be her husband in the resurrection? Their case was an attempt to get Jesus to refute the concept of resurrection, and thus his message was that he would rise again.

A story like this where the woman was passed along the brothers like a piece of property is quite offensive to us in these modern times. Well, actually, by the time of Jesus, this rule was not in practice, but it was a good try to provoke Jesus into an argument about resurrection. Naturally, Jesus was smart enough to avoid the specifics of this example.

When Jesus responded to the Sadducees question about marriage, he was announcing that the resurrection would mark the end of some questionable norms such as the oppression of women.

I see two issues in this reading. Firstly, that of women’s rights. From a point of view of ethics, all companies, and professional organisations these days have a code of ethics which dictates how we should behave in a professional sense. This of course always incudes how we treat other people. Professionally, I had to observe both the University and the Institute of Professional Engineers code of ethics. In Jesus’ time, the ten commandments was effectively the Jewish code of ethics. However, there is one commandment that would be considered inappropriate to modern day behaviour.

“You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”

The commandment regarding of a man’s property inferred such ownership with the insidious inference that women were classed as property owned by a man, along with his animals. That unfortunately was true. The only protection, financial and societal, that a women had, was dependant on a husband or male parent, unless, as a widow to a rich man, she inherited enough of a fortune to live independently.

This commandment, as stated in Exodus is now inappropriate for this modern age of gender equality. It has now been abbreviated in most publications nowadays as simply “Thou shalt not covet” because such a practice of those times would nowadays harshly clash with our human rights in western countries, who, including us in New Zealand, have a commitment to gender equality. The current court-case regarding the treatment and conditions of the employment of women and girls in Gloria vale is an interesting example of such a challenge for women’s rights. International opinion has also currently shifted dramatically in this last week concerning the appalling treatment of women in Iran.

We can enjoy reflecting that we here in New Zealand led the way in the civilised world with women’s right to vote. The Women's Suffrage Petition resulted in the then Governor Glasgow signing the Electoral Bill on 19th September 1893, in which New Zealand became the first self-governing nation in the world to give women the right to vote.

Yes, change has been gradual, and looking back, we can actually see the beginning of change going right back to the signing of the Magna Carta.

The Magna Carta was an official document produced by the powerful land Barons of the time, which was signed by King John in 1215. It laid down the freedoms and the protection of rights people, and particularly, including women’s rights. It was the beginning of recognition of people’s rights in the United Kingdom.

We have certainly moved on, but there is a second issue here. The Sadducees had assumed that if the Pharisees believed in resurrection, which entailed a post-mortem extension of life, then it must rightfully entail an extension of the institutions, practices, and conditions that once made life good for those people.

There is nothing wrong with making sense of life from within the human perspective. That is what human beings do. In the form of Jesus Christ, God stood before us, and with us, as a human being, which empowered us to respond to God from our standpoint, as broken, messy, and complex as it is. The mistake, however, is to insist that all that life can mean, is contained within our own experience. Once we die and go to heaven, any situation we were in on earth is gone, it is irrelevant. The point Jesus makes, is that we might have been a president or king, we might have been in prison, or divorced several times, but once we are accepted into heaven it just does not matter what you status on earth may have been. Our acceptance into heaven will be a reflection, not only on our life, but what we were in life. More importantly, as Christians, it will be how we lived, and treated others that will be judged.

Thus, any particular human behavioural norms that are in conflict with Jesus’ frequent statements on issues of equality or race, are no longer applicable.

Amen