

“One Bride for Seven Brothers”

During his time as Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was often called on to represent not only the Church of England but the Church writ large. In several instances his role was to debate Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens at the time was the poster boy for the New Atheists as they styled themselves. I think the hopes were that Hitchens would demolish the fuddy duddy religion and the hairy Welsh primate. Instead the debates showed that Hitchens did not understand that Christians are not all fundamentalists or biblical literalists. Christianity, especially Anglicanism, can be quite nuanced.

There is a saying that goes something like this, “There are two kinds of people who need to read the Bible literally—fundamentalists and atheists.” In these debates Hitchens would rail against some aspect of Christianity that he thought no one could possibly believe. Rowan Williams would listen patiently and then when it was his turn to speak he would simply say, “I don’t believe that either.” Hitchens was left stammering for his next statement having thought he had Williams and all of Christianity on the ropes.

It seems to me that Williams was taking his debating style from Jesus. Whenever Jesus is confronted by religious authorities of his day thinking they have got him just where they want him, Jesus responds with a question or statement that shows they are asking the wrong question. Their small mindedness or literalism always seems to trap them in a corner rather than trapping Jesus.

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus is confronted by some Sadducees. Sadducees were one of several sects of Judaism. Other active sects of Judaism were the Pharisees, Zealots, and Essenes. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection or an afterlife, and they did not believe in angels and demons. They believed that humans had completely free will. They also held that the Torah alone had divine authority. The other two parts of the Hebrew Scriptures—the prophets and writings—did not have such authority. Perhaps most important about the Sadducees was the power they wielded.

The Sadducees were a small sect, but they controlled the Temple in Jerusalem. In order to hold on to their control they had to cooperate with the Roman Empire. Their job was to keep the religious pilgrims in line especially during holy festivals. As long as they did that the Romans left them alone. If they failed in that then the Romans would come down hard on them and destroy the Temple. This is exactly what happened during the Great Jewish War in 70 A.D.

In today’s scene from Luke the Sadducees think they have Jesus tricked with their wily question about marriage, death, and the resurrection. They begin their questioning by setting the scenario in the context of a Mosaic law called Levirate marriage. That is, a man was obliged to marry his deceased brother’s wife if his brother died without fathering a child. This concept shows up in the stories of Tamar in Genesis¹ and in the Book of Ruth.² The point of this law was to keep family inheritance in the family. If a man died without an heir his wife could take the

¹ Genesis 38

² Ruth 4, especially verse 5

property with her into another marriage and thus the property would leave the family. A positive for the widow was that she was not left without a male protector. While she might have property from her late husband it would be difficult for her to do anything with the property without a husband.

The woman in this hypothetical scenario marries each of seven brothers in turn, changing the Broadway show into “One Bride for Seven Brothers.”³ All of them die without giving her a child. Then she dies. Thus in the Sadducees minds the dilemma is which of the brothers she is married to in the resurrection. But remember the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection to begin with. (We should note that if the genders in the scenario were reversed there would not be a problem since polygyny was permissible.)

However, despite what they perceived as a clever and confounding question for Jesus, he turns the tables on them. He explains that the resurrection is not like this life. In the age of the resurrection marriage is not necessary. A person in the resurrection is changed and is more like an angel than a human. In the resurrection we return to a state like the Garden of Eden. In that situation there is no need for procreation and no need for marriage.

What’s more, because he knows they are also making light of the concept of resurrection he points out that when Moses encountered God in the burning bush God spoke of those we presume to be dead as if they are alive. Jesus makes it clear they are alive in the resurrection with God. Jesus is not taken in by the Sadducees scheming. Not only does he prove their tricky question is irrelevant, but he also proves that the resurrection is real.

The Sadducees of Jesus’ age and the New Atheists of our age are smart. I do not think they are evil, but they just are not quite as smart as they think they are. We are not called to dislike, disparage or despise them. We are called to have patience with them and pray for them in their self-righteousness. We should also be watchful about our own self-righteousness. We who believe in God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are just as prone to being divisive and hurtful as are atheists. Note that neither Rowan Williams nor Jesus ridicules his opponent. Rather they hope to open the door for them to the knowledge of what it means to be a person of faith. They call them to a deeper understanding of God, and away from a shallow literalistic conception.

No matter how much we study, pray, worship, discuss, and study some more we are not able to get a complete understanding of God or the nature of God. St. Paul reminds us in First Corinthians “For we know in part, and we prophesy in part...For now we see through a glass, darkly.” We cannot know God fully in this life. Whenever we are certain we can be sure that we are only fooling ourselves. Let us be patient and kind with those who are opponents of our faith. Let us also be patient and kind with ourselves for we are also on a journey of understanding.

³ Apologies to Stanley Donan et al.