

## **Third Sunday before Advent 2016**

### **Job 19: 23 – 27a; Luke 20: 27 – 38**

So, golden moments of British TV sit-coms: what are people's choices? . . . . Dad's Army; they actually manage to capture a German submariner; Pike's being cheeky to him; he says "Vot iz you name?" and Mainwaring jumps in "Don't tell him, Pike!" Mainwaring just walks straight into the trap. It is a classic! But we need to be careful that we don't fall into a trap over this morning's Gospel reading. There is a question about life after death in the reading. But it's not a reading about life after death.

The Sadducees ask Jesus a question about resurrection life and he just side-steps it. Which isn't very helpful if you're looking for pastoral reassurance. One of the preoccupations of the human condition is to be anxious about what happens to us after death. And when I'm trying to reassure people and to express my absolute faith that that there is something beyond this

life and that all will be well – and that is my absolute faith, about which I have absolutely no doubts – it's tempting to say too much and to start fantasising about what it will be like, and speculating about who will be there and whom we'll meet. In actual fact, we simply don't know. And if only Jesus had told us. It would have made it so much easier for us to explain our faith.

But Jesus, in this story from Luke's Gospel, isn't in a pastoral encounter. So we don't get the answer to the pastoral question we want to ask. The people speaking to Jesus weren't interested in the answer we want to know. They were just trying to catch Jesus out. So Jesus isn't bothered with pastoral sensitivity: he just gives it them with both barrels.

This story isn't about life after death. It's about the sort of mentality that Jesus was up against. It just so happens that the question – the *reductio ad absurdum*

- which displays that mentality was about life after death. But it might have been about anything.

It helps us to approach this reading if we remember that, over the last 15 years or so, we've been encouraged to treat these Sundays between All Saint and Advent as a little mini-season: the Kingdom Season. The Church's year begins with Advent. The climax of the Church's year, therefore, is the Sunday before Advent. So now we're hurtling towards that climax. At the climax we celebrate that the Christ, who emptied himself and stooped to be born among us; who lived a human life and taught and healed and inspired; who died and rose for us; and who sent his Spirit to guide us; that Christ is King. And therefore in these weeks running up to it we're reflecting on the nature of the kingdom over which he is king.

And the string of people who try to catch Jesus out about it – and the Sadducees in this morning's reading are just the latest in a whole string – they all suffer

from a poverty of imagination about that kingdom. They can only think in human terms; and in terms of the values of human society. All they can think about is

- Political allegiance: is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?
- Property rights: whose wife will the woman be? (Remember, wives were pieces of property!)
- And value for money, getting what you pay for: thinking the gifts of rich people were more significant than the widow's mite.

Remember, marriage has changed unrecognisably between the Bible times and now. (Marriage can change: just park that thought for another discussion on another occasion.) But the point is that this woman did not have the sort of relationship with her first husband or any subsequent husband that my wife has with me. She was just property. It's like saying the Rector has a Ford Focus; after a couple of years he trades it in and somebody else buys it; they run it for a couple of years and then somebody else buys and runs

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

it for a couple of years; and then it's scrapped. In heaven, whose Ford focus will it be? That's all these people could think about: money and property rights.

But the point is that the Kingdom of God, that Jesus is ushering in, turns all these values on their head. It subverts them. And Jesus calls us, he calls each one of us, to acknowledge his kingship and therefore to live with the subversive values of his kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is about how we value human worth. Jesus doesn't care whether you're rich or poor, or about the legal categorisation of your domestic arrangements, whether you voted Remain or Brexit or whether you've got a degree in theology and a bishop's licence to do this or that or the other.

What Jesus does care about is that we live with peace and justice and respect for creation. He cares when people manipulate political power; when they exert economic control over others; and when they define

themselves by their material possessions – or even calibrate their relation with God by their material possessions.

Jesus said that the Lord is the God of the living, not the dead. And whether you're living is not determined by whether your life on this earth is still current or has ended. Whether you're living is determined by whether you live by faith like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and like the person Jesus is calling each of us to be. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had plenty of faults. They made plenty of mistakes. But they were people of faith who had a living – if at times turbulent! – relationship with God.

Jesus invites us to join the living by offering us life, and life in all its fullness. Life lived in all its fullness is life lived in the Kingdom of God, this side of the grave or beyond it. The hallmarks of life lived that way according to that kingdom are the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Let it therefore be our prayer that God's Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.