



## God of the living, God of unfolding purposes

**If you can't see it any other way, if you don't believe in resurrection, think of it this way: "God is the God of the living."** That's the answer Jesus gives to the question a religious group called the Sadducees put to him. They don't believe in resurrection. Jesus does. And to make his point, Jesus quotes Exodus 3, an Old Testament passage every one of his hearers knows by heart. He quotes God speaking from the burning bush who famously reveals his identity simply as "I AM WHO I AM"; "I AM WHAT I AM. I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." And for Jesus this means that God is always present in the here and now. So no one is dead to God. No one is beyond hope. For God is the God of the living. And to be alive is to see a future. And to have a future is to live in hope. **And hope is always the present filled with the God of unfolding purposes.** And so our hope – and specially in these days of remembrance – our hope, even for those who have died, is that they, nevertheless, remain alive to God.

\* \* \*

I have a former professor from theological college who in the past five years or so has experienced the degenerative effects of a quickly advancing Alzheimer's disease. The breakdown of neurological centres that produce thought, and memory, and speech, and all cognitive functions seems particularly cruel for a man who was one of the world's great New Testament scholars. His former students gathered at a conference recently in which he was invited to hear academic papers engaging his own insights on the biblical texts. All of this was happily interlaced with personal anecdotes

about studying with someone wise and knowledgeable, but also deeply in love with God.

Because of the state of his Alzheimer's, this professor is no longer able to produce his own writing. But with his daughter helping him to the podium at the end of the conference, he stood up thank those who celebrated his life and achievements.

He was thankful, he said, for words. And for thought he was still capable of. And for moments of clarity. And for faces he still remembers. And for the ability to recall many things from his past. And specially for a life shared with his recently deceased wife. Even so many other memories are now simply lost to him.

But he concluded his address by saying, "Every day I lose more of my memory. But today I am hopeful. Because I know now that my students are holding my memories for me...."

There is something there of what Jesus is saying about resurrection: **in God's future, no one is forgotten; no one is left behind; no story is lost to the God of the living.**

\* \* \*

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Because Jesus' talk of resurrection hope comes in reply to a particularly offensive question: 'So whose property is she anyway? Whose property is the woman – in the hypothetical scenario his questioners paint – when she has been widowed by

seven husbands?’ That’s the conflict at the heart of our Gospel reading.

The backdrop against which the conflict plays out is equally stark. Bear in mind that all of this takes place in a time when clan loyalties, tribal identity and patriarchal rules of possession threaten the lives of those who are too weak to fend for themselves. This is true of the ancient world on the whole. In patriarchal societies, property is passed down from fathers to sons. So, what happens when a woman is left widowed and childless?

But in a way, the question the Sadducees are asking is not even to do with the woman. On the face of it, their question is a theological conundrum about marriage: “When the woman dies, and if there is a resurrection, whose wife – in the succession of the seven brothers – will she be?” (Luke 20.33) In fact, the theological quandary can hardly veil the real question behind the question. They set up a hypothetical situation – Okay, Jesus, suppose there is resurrection from the dead.... What they really want to know is who gets possession of the property the woman brings with her..? So the woman in the story is simply an excuse for a discussion among men about property and about bragging rights.

But on this point, for those who hear in the Old Testament the word of God, a biblical injunction intervenes putting in place economic protection and family obligations intended to guarantee the widow’s welfare. So for example: No, the family of the dead spouse may not claw back property therefore leaving the widow destitute. **In fact, in the Old Testament, the community of people who claim the name of God are supposed to be defined by how they provide for the most vulnerable in society: the poor, the widow, and the orphan.** Failure to fulfil economic obligations towards the poor is a sin precisely because

people of faith are supposed to honour God by their justice.

And whatever problems we might have with specific passages in the Old Testament, its overall message is unavoidable and consistent throughout: equity in the courts, justice in government, fairness in commerce, transparency in personal dealings, these are the marks of a people who know God’s mercy. **This in the end is what’s at stake in our Gospel reading: the biblical principle that, in God’s economy, justice is the ultimate mercy.**

\* \* \*

Jesus simply takes this for granted in his reply to his religious opponents. And so he says that at the resurrection, property will not be on anyone’s mind. Because before God no-one is defined by the narrow scope of material needs. This is where those who took part in yesterday’s Million Mask March in central London may have a point: and certainly if their protest is against political and economic systems that value or devalue human worth according to the measure of what we own and what we earn, property and profit. Thankfully, there were relatively few incidents at the demonstrations. But I believe—if we see the protesters’ slogan in the best possible light, “one solution: revolution”—what they are saying to us is simply, “There’s got to be a better way.”

And, for Jesus, yes, economic inequality has no part of God’s resurrection hope. And so in his answer he insists that, with God, **there’s got to be a better way.**

\* \* \*

I want to, hopefully, make my own contribution towards that better way. And I want to do that along with you. Perhaps taking a something of a risk in doing so. Because if justice is a sign of God’s mercy, then this has to be more than a promise of a

yet-to-be-seen future. **It has to be about justice rooting itself in our midst and blossoming into the good of the world.**

Presidential elections in America are on Tuesday. As an American living overseas, I have an absentee ballot. It looks like this. *This is the ballot paper* that I will fax to my county register on Tuesday to be included in the electoral count. So in fulfilling my civic duty, and in making my choice for a candidate and against others, **I am making myself fully accountable to you — as my church community — and accountable to that message in Christ’s Gospel, that in God’s economy, justice is mercy and therefore there’s got to be a better way.**

There are five parties which have put forward candidates for the office of the

president and vice-president of the United States. I believe you know the two leading parties and their candidates.

\* \* \*

*There: I have now marked my vote.* This will go out to America on Tuesday. And I simply ask that you forgive me, if you think in making myself publically accountable to you in this way—I have made a mistake. But I pray and hope—and I know a number of you do as well because you have told me so—that we may have in the United States, and for the good of the world, that better way in the first woman president.

Ivan Khovacs