

It really is a ridiculous question, posed by religiously intellectual snobs used to dealing with the upper crust of society. A man marries a woman and dies before an heir is produced. She then must marry the brother, who also dies before an heir, and the cycle continues until at last 7 brothers have married and died and the woman dies as well. So who does she belong to in the resurrection?

It is a ridiculous question, posed by Sadducees—who don't believe in the resurrection—to Jesus, who does. Trying to catch him out, trying to make him look like a fool.

The Sadducees were a group of Jews who were, basically, traditionalists—at least as far as the Torah went. To them if it hadn't been written in the original Torah it was not legitimate. The Pharisees, their more progressive counterparts, believed that the Torah had to keep up with changes in interpretation, changes in the oral tradition that continued to enlarge and enhance their canon of scripture. Sadducees only followed Torah, while Pharisees allowed prophetic literature and Psalms to be added to their canon.

The issue at hand was the resurrection of the dead. Sadducees found no mention of any sort of continuation of life after death in the original Torah and did not believe in any sort of resurrection. In other words, at death, everything ended. Again, it was a sort of intellectual argument over doctrine, not all that different than some of the arguments that Catholics and Protestants have today.

It reminds me a little bit of a scene in the movie *My Cousin Vinnie*, in which Joe Pesci plays a New York city lawyer who goes to a small town in Alabama to defend his cousin from a murder charge. Marisa Tomei plays Vinnie's girlfriend Mona Lisa Vito, who is a hairdresser and girly-girl. When Vinnie calls Lisa to the stand as an expert in car mechanics the prosecutor can't believe she would know anything about cars so he sets out to make her—and Vinnie—look foolish by asking a trick question. She turns the table by not only showing that it is a trick question but by giving the answer as if the question had been asked correctly. The dialogue goes something like this:

D.A. Jim Trotter: *Now, uh, Ms. Vito, being an expert on general automotive knowledge, can you tell me... what would the correct ignition timing be on a 1955 Bel Air Chevrolet, with a 327 cubic-inch engine and a four-barrel carburetor?*

Mona Lisa Vito: *It's a b***shit question.*

D.A. Jim Trotter: *Does that mean that you can't answer it?*

Mona Lisa Vito: *It's a b***shit question, it's impossible to answer.*

D.A. Jim Trotter: *Impossible because you don't know the answer!*

Mona Lisa Vito: *Nobody could answer that question!*

D.A. Jim Trotter: *Your Honor, I move to disqualify Ms. Vito as a "expert witness"!*

Judge Chamberlain Haller: *Can you answer the question?*

Mona Lisa Vito: *No, it is a trick question!*

Judge Chamberlain Haller: *Why is it a trick question?*

Vinny Gambini: *[to Bill] Watch this.*

Mona Lisa Vito: *'Cause Chevy didn't make a 327 in '55, the 327 didn't come out till '62. And it wasn't offered in the Bel Air with a four-barrel carb till '64. However, in 1964, the correct ignition timing would be four degrees before top-dead-center.*

D.A. Jim Trotter: Well... um... she's acceptable, Your Honor.

It's a trick question that the Sadducees begin with too. The Sadducees begin by referring to what Moses wrote about Levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was a practice in which, if a woman married a man who died before an heir was produced she would then marry his brother. It was, even at that time, a very old custom and one that seems kind of odd to us today. In those days, however, two things were at stake: first, a widow without a son to care for her was in a very shaky situation because there was no one to take care of her. When her husband died his estate went to his male next-of-kin, either a brother or a son. If there was no son, no heir, and the widow couldn't inherit, she would marry the brother for protection and support.

The second issue here is that of property. Without an heir to the family name there would be no one to inherit the estate of the man who died. The family line would be at an end.

What the question is about, though, isn't levirate marriage—we can tell that by the extremes that the question is taken to. I can see them nudging each other, a smirk and a wink maybe, "Let's see if we can get the best of this bumkin". No, the real question here is one of interpretation—and specifically, a fundamental interpretation of Torah vs a more progressive interpretation. Or perhaps, an intellectual, elitist question around a custom that didn't really appeal or apply to the Sadducean upper class, designed to make Jesus look untrustworthy and ignorant.

But we can almost see Jesus rolling his eyes and hear him say it's a BS question, it's a trick question, and because it's a trick question there is no answer. So Jesus sidesteps the supposed question and answers it as if it had been asked correctly. Those who are alive now can be married. But those who have died aren't of this life anymore, and by Moses' own interpretation have been raised and are *alive with God*; therefore God still knows them and calls them by name. The woman doesn't belong to anyone in the resurrection except God; and those imaginary brothers that she supposedly marries? Neither do they belong to anyone but God in the resurrection.

If we belong to God in this life, we belong to God in the resurrection. Truth is, we don't "belong" to anyone but ourselves on this earth; we aren't owned by anyone (at least in theory.) But those who believe belong to God in this life and the next—and we even say this in our *Brief Statement of Faith*, that "in life and in death we belong to God."

And what does this do for us but give us hope—hope that there is more than this life we live in the material world. Hope that our loved ones who die before we do will go on as a part of that *something more*.

And that's a great comfort, isn't it? This life is rich with beauty and fullness, but this life can also be troubled and difficult. For those who are oppressed and deprived in this lifetime the promise of something more can mean everything.

What do we believe about life after death? It is a question that we all face at some point in our lives—what happens when we die? From our earliest years we experience death—our grandparents die, a beloved pet dies, and we begin to wonder, will I die? And what happens to us, what will happen to me when I die? As we age the question becomes more urgent: we feel our bodies weakening, we know we have but a few years left, what will happen to us when we die? Is it just a nothingness in which we have no more sensation, no more feeling? Will our bodies still ache and tire the way they do now? What happens when we die? It is the unanswerable question which is probably why it is still as relevant today as it has been down through the ages.

This past week on Tuesday it was All Saints Day, a day to remember all of the faithful of every generation, both living and dead, but especially those who have died in the faith. The Companion to the Book of Common Worship says :

All Saints' Day is a time to rejoice in all who through the ages have faithfully served the Lord. The day reminds us that we are part of one continuing, living communion of saints. It is a time to claim our kinship with the "glorious company of apostles ... the noble fellowship of prophets ... the white-robed army of martyrs" (Te Deum). It is a time to express our gratitude for all who in ages of darkness kept the faith, for those who have taken the gospel to the ends of the earth, for prophetic voices who have called the church to be faithful in life and service, for all who have witnessed to God's justice and peace in every nation.

To rejoice with all the faithful of every generation expands our awareness of a great company of witnesses above and around us like a cloud (Hebrews 12:1). It lifts us out of a preoccupation with our own immediate situation and the discouragements of the present. In the knowledge that others have persevered, we are encouraged to endure against all odds (Hebrews 12:1-2). Reminded that God was with the faithful of the past, we are reassured that God is with us today, moving us and all creation toward God's end in time.

So even though the Sadducees asked a ridiculous question for a malicious purpose, the answer that Jesus gives can bring comfort to us and to all who want to know, "what happens when I die?" by directing our attention to the God who is love eternal and whose faithfulness goes on forever and ever. Because of this, even though we pass on from this life, in God we are forever. Amen.