Sermon on Luke 20:27–38 “Children of the Resurrection”

There is a certain irony in the Sadducees’ approach to Jesus. They were the theological conservatives of their day, committed to the written Torah but sceptical of later developments such as belief in the resurrection of the dead. So when they came to Jesus with their far-fetched story about a woman who married seven brothers in succession, their aim was not genuine inquiry but ridicule. They wanted to show that resurrection is absurd because it makes nonsense of one of the most sacred human institutions: marriage.

The story about the widowed woman is almost comical in its exaggeration. It is meant to trap Jesus in contradiction, to force him into a corner. But Jesus’ reply is as incisive as it is unsettling: “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. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”

In one sentence, Jesus relativises the institution of marriage. Marriage, he says, is for this age, not the next. In the resurrection, human life is not ordered around procreation, inheritance, or social stability, but around God’s life and our life in and with God. According to Jesus’ teaching, the most important descriptive label of our existence is not “husband” or “wife,” but “child of God.”

I want to consider how this saying might be heard both pastorally and theologically.

Pastorally speaking, this will be a hard saying for some. Those who have experienced the loss of a beloved husband or wife may carry a deep hope of being reunited in heaven, and Jesus’ words sound as if that hope is being taken away.

For others, however, his words may come as a quiet mercy. Not every marriage is a source of joy. Some have known loneliness within marriage, or the slow fading of affection, or even the wounds of betrayal or abuse.

Jesus’ teaching speaks into both situations. To those who long to be reunited with their loved one, his words lift their hopes higher. Not just husband and wife, but children of God, children of the resurrection, fully alive to God, and fully alive to one another, a deeper reunion, richer and more enduring than anything we can now imagine.

And to those who have experienced marriage as something to be endured rather than enjoyed, a burden – perhaps an intolerable one – his words carry a sense of healing and completion. In the life to come, what has been marred will be healed, and what was incomplete will be made whole. Even the ache of disappointed love will be taken up and transformed in a love that endures forever.

By declaring that marriage belongs to this age and not the next, Jesus does not diminish the goodness of marriage but frees us from its failures. The resurrection means that no broken bond, no unfulfilled longing, no human sorrow has the final word.

Yes, Jesus' words relativise the institution of marriage, but it does more than that: It draws the institution of marriage into God's fuller life, reminding his hearers that it is a gift for the journey, not a god for eternity.

This is a startling claim, especially when we remember how central marriage was in the ancient world. Marriage was not only about love or companionship; it was a way of securing lineage, property, and identity. To imagine life without marriage was to imagine a collapse of social order. Yet Jesus calmly declares that marriage is not ultimate. It is a gift for this present age, but in the age to come, it no longer defines us.

That does not mean marriage is meaningless now. It remains a space for love, fidelity, and the nurture of life. But it does mean we must resist the temptation to absolutise it. When the church treats marriage as the highest calling or the only legitimate way to live faithfully, we risk forgetting Jesus' words. In the resurrection, we are not husbands or wives, singles or widows, gay or straight. We are children of God, children of the resurrection.

Theologically, this poses a serious question: If marriage, one of the most enduring human institutions across most human civilisations and cultures, is relativised by the resurrection, what of other institutions and structures — family, nation, even the church itself? Jesus' teaching pushes us to see them all in a new light.

Family is a profound gift, yet Jesus himself once asked, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" before pointing to his disciples and saying, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Family ties, precious as they are, do not define us for eternity.

Nations, too, give us identity and belonging, yet the Apostle Paul famously declared that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. Resurrection relativises

nationalism, reminding us that our true citizenship is in heaven and that God's reign is inclusive. It embraces all peoples.

An example from our own nation's history: Today, 9 November, is the anniversary of the passing into legislation of the *Immigration Restriction Amendment Act* of 1920 — legislation that entrenched racial exclusion in Aotearoa New Zealand by tightening controls on "undesirable" immigrants, particularly from Asia and the Pacific. It was a law born of fear and white nationalism, drawing boundaries between who belonged and who did not. In time, as society and attitudes changed, so too did the law — repealed in 1964 and finally replaced in 1987 by a non-discriminatory immigration policy.

That change reminds us that human institutions, however well-intentioned, must be open to reform and renewal. Resurrection faith gives us the courage to see when something once thought necessary has become unjust, and to imagine a more generous future. For in the risen Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither insider nor outsider, but all are alive to God. Resurrection relativises every border and boundary, calling us to live now as citizens of that wider kingdom.

This relativising word of Jesus stands in tension with a theological idea that has often resurfaced in modern history: the so-called "orders of creation." The concept suggested that institutions like marriage, family, work, and the state were established directly by God and therefore carried unchanging authority. Some theologians used this idea to resist social change or to defend traditional norms as if they were eternal.

In the 1930s, this language was tragically exploited in Germany. Many church leaders, eager to accommodate themselves to the Nazi regime, invoked "orders of creation" to argue that the state had divine authority, that family and race were sacred institutions, and that Christians must support the national cause. In this way, theology was used to sanctify German nationalism racist ideology. Against this, the Confessing Church — in the Barmen Declaration of 1934 — insisted that no earthly institution can claim ultimacy. The only true order is the one revealed in Jesus Christ, who alone is the Word of God.

Seen against this backdrop, Jesus' words in Luke 20 are revolutionary. They expose the danger of ascribing eternal significance to human institutions. They remind us that every structure — however necessary or precious — is provisional. Only God's life endures forever.

Jesus' teaching challenges us to loosen our grip. Marriage, whether traditional or non-traditional, is not ultimate. What matters is not conformity to a culturally determined institution, but whether our relationships embody love, faithfulness, and justice in this present age. For those in non-traditional unions, this is liberating news: your worth is not dependent on fitting an institutional mould, but on the biblical claim that you are a child of God a child of the resurrection. For those in traditional marriages, it is equally freeing: your marriage is a gift, but it is not your salvation. Salvation lies in Christ alone.

At the heart of all this is the concept of resurrection. Resurrection is not just the resuscitation of life as we know it. It is the breaking open of a new reality where we are no longer defined by the roles, statuses, and institutions that define and order this age. Jesus makes this clear when he invokes the story of Moses at the burning bush. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living — the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their identities did not vanish with death. They are alive to God. And so are we.

This vision gives us a profoundly pastoral word. For the widow and widower who feel that their life is incomplete without a spouse, Jesus says: in the resurrection, your fullness rests in God. For the single person who wonders if they have missed out, he says: your truest status is not "single" but "child of God." For those in marriages that don't conform to traditional expectations, he says: your belonging does not depend on institutional approval but on God's grace.

And for all of us who are tempted to cling to family, nation, or church as ultimate sources of identity, the resurrection calls us back to what alone is ultimate: the God who gives life to the dead.

The Sadducees tried to make resurrection look ridiculous by tying it to the complexities of marriage law. Jesus answered by lifting the question to a higher plane. Resurrection is not about extending the institutions of this age into eternity. It is about being caught up in the life of God, where all institutions are relativised, and our only identity is as children of God.

This is not a denial of marriage, family, or nation, but a liberation from their limitations. They are good gifts, but they are not gods. They are temporary shelters on a pilgrim road, not the final dwelling place. So let us live with gratitude for these gifts, but also with freedom. For in Christ, we already share the life that relativises all institutions and that alone endures: life with the living God.