

HE IS NOT GOD OF THE DEAD, BUT OF THE LIVING - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 20, 27-38

There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.”

And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.”

After Jesus in the temple denounced the highest authorities for having transformed the temple into a den of thieves, an offensive was unleashed against him by the whole council, by the chief priests, scribes and elders and the Pharisees, who were amazed by his reply and kept quiet. Now it is the turn of the Sadducees, who are part of the priestly and economic aristocracy of the country.

Luke writes in chapter 20 verse 27 *“There came to him some Sadducees..”* The name derives from Sadoc, who was a priest at the time of King David, who consecrated Solomon instead of the rightful king, Adonis, as king of Israel and was rewarded with the office of high priest, he was the first high priest in the history of Israel.

“..those who deny that there is a resurrection, ..” The term "resurrection" appears in the Bible for the first time in the book of Daniel, chapter 12, but the Sadducees, extremely conservative and traditionalists, recognize as the inspired and divine word, only the books of Moses, the first five books of the law, the Torah. Therefore they recognize neither the prophets nor the subsequent writings and the resurrection was a fairly recent theory, a doctrine, carried out by the Pharisees who announced the exiling of the just. Holders of economic power, aristocracy, the Sadducees do not believe in resurrection. They are so good here that they do not need to hope for a better life in the afterlife.

“... and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher,..” they turn to Jesus, here with this typical falsehood because they do not go to learn, but they want to judge and condemn, *“Moses wrote for us..”* here they refer to Moses because he is the only one of whom they recognize the authority -

“..that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.” This was the law called the levirate, from “levir”, brother-in-law, contained in the book of Deuteronomy and in other texts of the Bible, which had been established for the person's name not to be extinguished. What did this law say? When a woman remained a widow without children, her brother-in-law was obliged to get her pregnant and the child who would be born would bear the name of her deceased husband, so that his name was perpetuated forever.

And, the Sadducees continue, they want to discredit Jesus with a ridiculous story, “*Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children.*” They refer to the biblical story of Tobias and Sarah, the woman to whom seven husbands died the same night of the wedding..” *And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died.*” They try to ridicule the fact of the resurrection and then to make Jesus fall into ridicule, thus denying him the enthusiastic support on the part of the crowds, so then to be able to take, capture, and kill him.

“Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?” Here the problem is not affective of those who will have this woman as a wife; the woman was used exclusively to have children. Then the problem does not concern an affective problem, but concerns descent: who will have his descendants of these seven husbands who have had this woman? Why, continue the Sadducees, *“For the seven had her as wife.”* So they want to know which of these seven brothers will continue their descendants.

And Jesus responds to the Sadducees by ridiculing them in turn *“The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, ...”* And here is Jesus explanation *“... for they cannot die anymore...”*

The meaning of the passage is on the fact that death does not interrupt life, but allows existence to manifest itself in a new, full and above all definitive form. And Jesus says *“..they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels.”* Jesus ironically speaks of angels precisely because the Sadducees did not believe in angels. From whom do the angels receive life? Certainly not from parents. From God. Then Jesus makes us understand that there is no longer a need to make one's existence eternal through the birth of a child because life is received, like the angels, directly from God and, receiving this life of God, it is eternal and indestructible.

Jesus affirms in fact *“..and (they)are sons of God, being son of the resurrection.”* that is, generated by God. It is God who communicates to them his own life and the life that comes from God is a life forever.

And then to them who turn to Moses, Jesus quotes Moses treating them as ignorant, *“But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, ...”* therefore they should know *“...in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”* It is the famous episode of the burning bush when God manifested himself and speaks of the three characters to whom, due to a divine intervention, it was possible to have descendants from the wives who were sterile.

And Jesus continues, and it is the most important affirmation of this passage *“Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.”* Jesus' God is not the God who resurrects the dead, this was the theory, the doctrine of the Pharisees; the God of Jesus is not the God who rises up the dead, but it is the God who communicates a life of such a quality that makes it indestructible, therefore capable of overcoming death.

