

“..HE IS NOT 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.”

The Sadducees set a trap for Jesus. They dare not confront Him on doctrinal or political fronts because they know they might be defeated. In fact Jesus had already silenced the High Priests, the scribes and the elders with his replies, and he succeeded even in silencing the aggressive Pharisees.

The evangelist writes that the Pharisees, “*..marveling at his answer they became silent.*” (Luke 20,26) they cannot eliminate Jesus because he has a great following with the people, neither can they make him a martyr. So, the Sadducees decide to lure him onto slippery ground where once fallen, the aspiring Messiah would have difficulty to right Himself, for ridicule and disrepute.

The aristocratic caste of the Sadducee priests, which derives the name from *sadoc*, the priest that consecrated Solomon as King, the son of David and Bathsheba, instead of the legitimate king Adonijah. This caste of Sadducees’ priests became not only the political power, but also the economic power, they were very rich.

They accepted as the word of God only the first five books of the Bible and refused the books of the prophets. For what reason? Because in the prophets there is the constant complaint against the

injustice that creates great riches, but also great poverty. Therefore they refused it because the situation as it was went well for them.

They address Jesus with a respectable title, *Teacher*, but in reality they do not want to learn from him but to discredit him. And they ask him a question that is based on Moses' laws, in the book of Leviticus, where Moses says: If someone's married brother dies, without sons, his brother takes the wife and gives a descendent to his brother.

What is the meaning of this law? The levirate law says that the brother-in-law, of a widow without sons had the duty to make her pregnant, because it was important that the husband's name continued. It was a way to be eternal, to continue his own name ,every son was named after the father.

So, when a woman remained a widow, without having had a son, the brother-in-law had the duty to get her pregnant and the son born would take the name of the dead husband. The law prescribes; in this way to assure the continuation, as there is written in the book of Deuteronomy: "*.. that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.*" (Deuteronomy 25,6)

According to the culture of that time – and this helps to understand the phrase better – the marriage had the sole purpose to insure the continuation of the male lineage, the woman served only to produce sons.

Therefore the scruple of love did not exist, only the realization of a son. So, inspired by the popular story of Sarah, the unfortunate bride of seven husbands who dead on the wedding night , the Sadducees pretend – as if it was real - the gruesome story of these seven brothers all dead without being able to produce a son with this woman had been wife to all seven.

The Sadducees have no interest in the woman, they do not wish to know a woman like that, they only want to know which of the dead, once risen, will receive immortality through the name given to the son, Therefore it is not a problem of affection (whose wife is she?), but who with this woman is able to have a son.

So ,the Sadducees try to ridicule and make fun of Jesus. Well in His reply Jesus takes His distance from the popular interpretation of the resurrection, understood to be the return to the physical life of the dead, and Jesus replies that life of the resurrected does not depend on the procreation, the relationship between husband and wife, but comes from the power of God.

And Jesus mentions the angels. Why the angels? Because the Sadducees do not believe in angels. As angels receive life not from a father and a mother, but directly from God, as with the resurrection life remains eternal because it comes from God.

The Sadducees, feeling themselves powerful with the authority of Moses to oppose Jesus, Jesus responds, referring precisely to Moses, to that which he wrote, demonstrating how they are shortsighted and limited in their reading of the scriptures and he refers to God's reply to Moses in the well known episode of the burning bush, saying: "*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*" (Exodus 3,6)

When it is said that the Lord is the God of..... it does not mean the God that Abraham, Isaac or Jacob believed in, but the God that protected them. How did he protect them? With his life, keeping them away from death.

So, being under God's protection means having his same life and a faithful God that does not allow to die those that he has loved. And this is said in the most important phrase in this passage, that throws new light on the idea of life, death and resurrection, "*...he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.*"

Jesus' God does not raise the dead, but communicates with the living, his own life, a life that is of such quality that it is able to overcome death.