

I'm very grateful not to be the vicar of one of those portmanteau parishes like the one my daughter lives in, which rejoices in the name of Harting with Elsted and Treyford cum Didling. Quite apart from the involuntary grin at the 'Didling' bit, this parish has four churches, four congregations to look after, four places where, at least in theory, there should be a service each Sunday. But it can be much worse. There are some rural areas where one benefice can cover a dozen villages, each with its own church. The prospect of pulling a sermon or sermons together, week in, week out, which will sound fresh to each new group of listeners and hold their attention, is too much to contemplate. Where would the ideas come from? Where, in fact, do any ideas for sermons come from?

We'll leave aside those over-worked clergy who subscribe to sermon-providing services. I can assure you that nobody here has yet been driven to that extreme. Occasionally it's easy. A phrase or an idea springs up at you from one of the Sunday readings, and off you go, full of inspiration. More often I read through the material a few days in advance, and then let it fester. Something usually bubbles up by Saturday evening. Most clergy are shameless borrowers of other people's ideas. In the academic world, if you copy something without acknowledgement it is called plagiarism, and is strictly prohibited. Late on a Saturday evening for sermon-preparers it can be relief from desperation. We've all had the experience of not having a clue about where to start. It's a bit like turning over an exam paper and realising that it might just as well be written in a foreign language. Even the questions don't make sense.

So here we are this morning, and it's been that sort of week. What on earth (or possibly in heaven) is going on between Jesus and the Sadducees? The question they ask is absurd, and they aren't asking it because they really want to know the answer. They don't believe in resurrection, in an afterlife, so whatever answer Jesus gives is unlikely suddenly to change their minds. No; they are point-scoring, trying to be clever, trying to trip him up.

At which juncture a quote from someone else crept into my mind. The collect for the nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, which is traditionally the preacher's 'graveyard slot', begins: 'O God, forasmuch as without thee, we are not able to please thee...'. But it was modified many years ago by (I believe, but have not been able to verify this) a very senior clergyman, as follows:

'O God, forasmuch as without thee, we are not able to doubt thee; grant us by thy grace to convince this whole race it knows nothing whatever about thee.'

This is the problem for the Sadducees. As Jesus might say if they were having this discussion today: 'Look, chaps, you just don't get it. Your idea of the afterlife, which, by the way, you don't believe in, is essentially just like now but a bit cleaner and shinier. The eternal life that God promises to those who believe in him and follow me isn't anything like that at all. It's a completely different dimension – it just isn't possible to describe it in words that would make sense to you.'

Which is the difficulty with trying to talk or write about these things. We cannot get beyond our own earthly mind-set. Perfectly good Christian people have carried on for two thousand years in much the same way as the Sadducees, trying to encapsulate God or heaven in words and ideas from their own experience. Sydney Smith famously said that his idea of heaven was

eating caviar to the sound of trumpets. Personally, it would have to be raspberries. Only a few days ago a Christian website proposed that each of us should spend fifteen minutes every day filling our mind with God. This received the acerbic comment that if you can fill your mind with God in fifteen minutes, both your mind and your God are too small.

This idea that our minds and our language are utterly inadequate to understand or describe God is very old and very helpful. It was first articulated in the sixth century by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, a Christian philosopher, and it is called Apophatic Theology. 'Apophatic' comes from Greek and means without or beyond words. We can experience God, but we can never find words to convey that experience to others. If you find it difficult to talk about your faith to other people, that is partly why. Think how peculiar the works of many mystics seem, whether Ezekiel, St John in the Book of Revelation, Julian of Norwich, St John of the Cross or even some of Rowan Williams' writings. What they sensed, felt, somehow knew, as a result of a lifetime of prayer and contemplation, just doesn't transfer properly to speech or text.

So perhaps I should not have produced a sermon for this morning. Maybe it would have been more helpful to quote one or two lines from hymns: 'Thou, who art beyond the farthest mortal eye can scan', or 'Help us to see 'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee'. Then I should have invited you to spend the next ten minutes 'lost in wonder, love and praise'. Whereas I have probably, in line with that bishop's injunction, 'convinced this whole place it knows nothing whatever about thee.'