

The Sadducees

There are passages in the New Testament which refer to “the Jews” in an unfavourable light. It seems quite clear that these passages make reference to the leaders of the Jewish community, not to the Jewish people as a whole. As Martin Luther pointedly reminded us, Jesus Christ was born a Jew.

God originally selected a particular people to bear His message and to ultimately be a light to the Gentiles. We Christians are the spiritual successors of the Biblical Jews. We are the wild vines that have been grafted in, the stones who have been raised to be sons and daughters of Abraham. Thus any seemingly negative references to “the Jews” in the New Testament are directed at the leaders of the Israelite community at the time, particularly the spiritual leadership. Recollect that all the apostles were Jews. By grace through faith we Christians have become the chosen people, the heirs of the Covenant.

In Jesus’ time, the leadership of the Jewish community was broadly divided into two different groups, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were the members of the orthodox priestly caste who lived by the law of the Old Testament and hoped for an eternal reward in an afterlife. On the other hand, the Sadducees were a competing sect of the Jewish social elite who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees lived as Jews, observed the constraints of the Old Testament law and perceived themselves to be part of the historic Jewish nation. Their unique Jewish ethical beliefs and their adherence to the ritual of Jewish culture was based upon tradition and reason, not on the promise of an eternal reward.

The chief priest and the Pharisees resisted Jesus because, among other things, they saw Him as a threat to their own social position. In the personal presence of the Son of God, the conventional religious establishment became redundant. After Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, the leading Pharisees continued to resist Jesus’ disciples and His teaching because they feared to lose their unique national identity in the context of a new chosen people whose membership was based upon faith rather than genetic descent. Nevertheless, we can assume that most of the early Jewish converts to Christianity, like the Apostle Paul, were from the Pharisee sect. Learned Pharisees would readily see how the life of Christ, including His death and resurrection, represented the specific fulfillment of unequivocal prophecy.

During His earthly ministry, the Sadducees had tried to tempt Jesus with sophisticated questions. However, they were not out to destroy Jesus, just to show, on the basis of their worldly intellect, that His doctrine was at odds with their earthly logic. They had sought to discredit the notion of an afterlife by using the example of the woman who was widowed on several occasions. They had asked Jesus, in the resurrection whose wife she would be. Jesus answered, “*Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. For in the resurrection people do not marry, nor are they given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven. However, concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what has been spoken to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living”*” (Matthew 22:29-32). Thus, quite simply, Jesus confounded the supposed wisdom of men. Were the highly educated and self-important Sadducees convinced? Let us hope that some of them were. But remember, “*For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For Scripture has said, “He catches the wise people by their own craftiness”*” (1 Corinthians 3:19).

When we study the New Testament, we tend to particularly emphasise the situation of the Pharisees because of their openness to bribery or corruption in betraying the Messiah and handing Him over to the Roman authorities to be executed on account of their selfish political intrigue. We think of Pharisees as representative of high-minded hypocrites who exalt themselves and let the true treasure slip away between their fingers.

I think it is appropriate for us to pay a bit more attention to the Sadducees in our time. You see, we live in a time and place where society is led by many secular nonbelievers, people who pay lip service to a morality of sorts, but for whom heaven and hell are anathema. 21st century Australian society is led by Sadducees who believe that they can make the best decisions on our behalf based on their intellect and their reason alone. A judgmental God is outside their equation. For our Sadducees the notion of an afterlife, of cosmic reward or retribution, is laughable. Even as a child Jesus was able to reason with the Pharisees, the priests, scribes and the lawyers. He could explain His doctrine having reference to the Scriptures which all accepted as fundamental. The grown Jesus was unable to make way with the chief priests because their perceived self-interest hardened their hearts. However, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, prominent Pharisees, followed Jesus. Note that they came to Him by night, because they feared their own colleagues of the Pharisaical establishment.

But, alas, the Sadducees recognise no higher authority than their own precious intellects. When will they realise that the foolishness of God surpasses the wisdom of men? Perhaps some of today’s Sadducees, who are entangled in the wisdom of their own conceits, can be won over by Christian kindness and good works. I wonder, if the man whom the Good Samaritan helped by the wayside happened to have been a Sadducee, perhaps his experience changed his perspective.

As Christians, we are well advised to be wary of those elected to positions of authority today who do not believe in God, who do not have a hope of heaven. The decisions they make are not always in accord with God’s Word, so we must pray for them and for our country, that God will keep and guide us, until He calls us home.