

Keep it Simple

The Pharisees whom we meet in the Gospels believed in an afterlife, immortality – beyond the grave. The more conservative Sadducees, the priestly caste that ran the Temple in Jerusalem, did not. This life was it! The clan or tribe or family might live on but the individual member's death was final. He or she passed into a land of shadows – if anywhere.

For that reason, the life of a husband (who, like a branch of an extended family tree, had fallen to the ground without offspring) could only be perpetuated *by means of a legal fiction*. Namely: the deceased and childless husband's widow had to marry his closest male relative, a brother or cousin or uncle – whatever - and bear him a child who would become heir to the name and property of her deceased husband. Thus the dead man would live on, *but even more so* the extended family (be it a clan or tribe) would maintain its integrity and vitality – fictitiously.

So the Sadducees in today's Gospel – to ridicule the Pharisees' belief in an after life – bring up the extreme case of seven brothers, six of whom have to marry sequentially the childless deceased brother's widow. Without any luck! Why? Because all six die before even *they* can beget a son to the first brother's widow. So if there is an afterlife, say the Sadducees (ha ha), how will they then sort out that mess - like whose wife is she??

Yet in a way they are unwittingly ridiculing *their own complicated, Rube Goldberg method* of insuring the phony perpetuation of the first brother's life by proxy, by a son not even his own, by a legal "make believe" instead of *daring to believe* that the first brother is not dead after all, nor are any of us whom God in death calls to himself. So why burden one's widow and male relatives with so convoluted a law in the first place?

You can look up Rube Goldberg on the Internet – plenty of stuff. Died in 1970 at age 87, was famous for drawing complicated contraptions to handle a simple task. For instance there was the Self-Operating Napkin. The drawing described a man raising a soup spoon to his mouth, which pulled a string, which jerked a ladle, which threw a cracker up to a parrot, which jumps from its perch to catch the cracker, upsetting its seed dish so that the seeds pour into a pail. The extra weight of the seeds in the pail pulls a cord which opens and triggers a cigarette lighter, setting off a sky rocket which causes a sickle to cut a string that activates a pendulum with an attached napkin, causing the napkin to swing back and forth across the diner's chin. Seems to mirror the Sadducees' method of "perpetuating" the life of a dead and childless husband - which I don't have the stamina to describe again: consult the start of this essay.

Aside from Jesus' affirming his own belief in an afterlife, I think he is also trying to get the Sadducees to *keep it simple*; that the more complicated you get in solving your problems [have you ever read the Congressional Record] the more likely you are to be off the track. Why not just admit that there is something within us, call it faith or hope or love, or all three that has the power to stretch our minds beyond the limits of reason – and therefore beyond death itself?