

Monastic mentors: Luke 20:27-38

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [November 2, 2004](#) issue

I would just as soon skip the first part of this Gospel reading. The Sadducees are trying to trick Jesus by getting him to respond to an impossible question about the resurrection. According to the law, if one of two brothers dies before his wife has children, then his brother marries her. But what if there are seven brothers, and each marries the woman in turn? To whom will she belong at the resurrection?

Jesus gets himself out of the Sadducees' trap neatly by stating that in the resurrection there will be neither giving nor taking in marriage. I wish he had also made it much clearer to that bunch of jerks that women, even their own wives, were not the property of their husbands, nor were they put on earth for the sole purpose of providing men with children.

I appreciate, however, the second half of the passage, where Jesus makes an argument about resurrection. Here he abandons his common method of telling a story with a conclusion the listener cannot escape. Instead, he quotes God's own self from the story of the burning bush. "I *am* the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob," the Lord tells Moses, and from this Jesus draws conclusions: since God is the God of the living, and since God is also the God of the patriarchs, then the patriarchs must be alive in God.

I believe in the communion of the saints—if this is what Jesus is really talking about—not as a peculiar abstract idea but as a concrete and most practical reality. I began to believe in it back in graduate school in the '60s. In those days I tried to think of myself as an atheist because I was pretty sure that the God Christians proclaimed loathed me for my sins—my laziness, my incompetence, my general lack of faith, and most of all my lack of love toward people in my life whom I knew I was supposed to love.

Religiously speaking, it was a hard time for me. One fall, I was spending many cold, rainy days looking for a dissertation topic in the Bodleian library in Oxford. I was reading an endless collection of whiny and threatening Syriac texts from the early church, and all I could see in them was what I had already heard in the country

summer revivals I had attended as a child in western Kentucky. God loved human beings; God hated sin; everybody is a sinner; God would send all sinners to hell if Jesus hadn't died in our place; believe it or you'll be sorry.

What opened a door for me were some unexpected words from Philoxenus of Mabbug, a sixth-century monophysite bishop and author of 13 very long sermons on the Christian life in the early Syrian and Egyptian monastic traditions. One morning when I was going through a pile of books, I picked up a fat, red, 19th-century translation of these homilies, and there was Philoxenus speaking to me: "Monks ought not judge each other, because God judges us much more leniently than human beings are able to do."

His words bowled me over. They were exactly what I needed to hear. They spoke convincingly to my heart of a God I had not yet been able to imagine, one whose kindness and love far outweighed any divine interest in my inadequacies. They conveyed to me that I ought not be intimidated by religious people who are judgmental, for their judgmentalism has very little of God in it. It is from that experience, by the way, that I came to identify myself as a Christian.

It hasn't been my only such experience, either. Twenty-six years ago, for example, I had to decide whether to accept a job offer in the school where I now teach. While I had continued to read and be profoundly moved and strengthened by the early monastic abbots and nuns, I was happy where I was, teaching Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac to small classes of students. I didn't want to leave. But the imagined voices of my early monastic teachers wouldn't leave me alone. "You have a choice," I heard them saying. "You can continue teaching Semitic languages which you enjoy, or you can act on what you know—that we have saved your life over the years, and we can save the lives of others as well if you chose to teach them about us."

Under this pressure from my ancient teachers who were alive in the communion of the saints, I took my present appointment. The first years were rough, but I continued to learn from those teachers and find ways to share their life-giving words with students who would probably not otherwise have encountered them.

Meanwhile, in these last years before my retirement, I am engaged in a deep and very long conversation with Julian of Norwich, a 14th-century English woman. Her insights into God the Trinity, Jesus our Mother, human nature and the larger creation continue to liberate me into a life in God I could not possibly otherwise have had,

and I hope they are liberating my students as well.

However I feel about Jesus' reply to the Sadducees concerning the poor woman with seven consecutive husbands, I am glad that Jesus cited Exodus to demonstrate to his opponents why he believed that God "is God not of the dead, but of the living, for they are all alive to him." This is certainly my experience.