

Divergence on the Lectionary - All Saints, Year C

First Reading

Daniel 7:1–3, 15-18

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter. Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.

The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.' After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.

"As I looked,

*thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.
A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.*

“I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

“I saw in the night visions,

*and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.*

“As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. ‘These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.’
(ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 1:11–23

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 6:20–31

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the

cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

I included a whole lot of italicized text this week because I thought that Daniel's distress at his visions needed more context. By reading those verses, his "anxious mind" seems to make better sense to me.

But that's not the point of the reading, especially in the context in which our lectionary has placed it. The thing that our lectionary choosers want us to hear is Daniel's vision of the "saints of the Most High," who shall "receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever." As though that were a reference somehow to those who have died and "gone to heaven" or some such. Actually, using it this way is hardly any better than the tragic uses to which the book of Revelation has been put by some Christians whose theology would otherwise make our lectionary choosers cringe.

That's because reading Daniel, or reading Revelation as though the author had any thought that what was written would be taken to have meaning beyond his audience's near-term future violates the very nature of the genre the share, the genre of apocalypse.

Apocalypse comes to us from authors writing during a period of intense persecution. During this time an author is inspired (I still see this as inspired writing, but inspired for a purpose to which God never meant it to be put.) to write a text to give courage to, literally to en-courage the people to whom he writes.

As a reader of Apocalypse I encounter a story of some beloved and trustworthy character from the biblical past, and this character's visions perfectly describe my present moment of great peril and go on to tell of God's plan to deliver me and my people from this peril. In the near term. But because the text is written write under the noses of my oppressors, the visions are written in code. This is why we find such fantastical images of beasts, or statues made of several different materials, all of which rest on feet of clay that must crumble. It would not do to have the oppressor read a text and recognize the prediction of their own downfall.

This form of literature was much more common during the intertestamental period (between the Old and New Testaments) than it is in the Bible. Daniel is the clearest and most vivid example in the Hebrew Scriptures. Revelation in the New Testament. (Though some would point also to Mark 13, often called Mark's "small apocalypse" as another example, I would treat that differently for reasons I'll get into when it rolls around in our lectionary.) During the intertestamental period, Enoch seems to be the most popular character through whom the apocalyptic authors spoke. There are, if I recall correctly, four different apocalypses attributed to the man who walked so closely with God that he didn't die, was just carried to heaven.

So Daniel was written, perhaps by more than one author, to encourage the Jewish people during the Antiochene persecution in the mid second century BC. Not by Daniel in the sixth century BC. Not during the Bablylonian captivity. It was written during the days that led up to the Maccabean revolt, and it was written for the Jews of that period who were undergoing unimaginable persecution. To usurp it's purpose so as to support our reverence for the saints, the "holy ones of the most high" is nearly as unhappy a choice as using Revelation to predict the Rapture. Some Christians in today's world still suffer persecution in some ways similar to what the Jews did during the Antiochene persecution, and may lay claim to its promise of near term help, but most of us don't, and we do a disserve to the text by suggesting that it Daniel's saints and ours are closely related.

I have quibbled with the folks who select our lectionary readings in the past and I will again, usually about the choice to leave out verses that might otherwise be illuminating. But this is the only time that I can remember saying that this is just a really bad choice, read in the context of All Saints.

Second Reading

I cannot read the second paragraph of our text from Ephesians for All Saints without being moved to tears. I could write pages and pages on that passage alone, trying to unpack all the things that this means to me, and maybe some day I will again. (I once preached a four part sermon series on that paragraph alone.) It is so densely packed with the various ramifications of what it means to be in Christ that each sentence seems worthy of its own sermon. Well, okay. Each phrase. It's really one very long run on sentence. I'll try to point to the various pieces of this paragraph that make my heart burst into song without going into them in great detail and invite you to ponder them. Then perhaps one or another of them will catch you up as well.

First - Paul prays that the Ephesians might have the eyes of their hearts enlightened. What this sings to me is that it's time to stop striving so hard to "see" what God is going. God does the enlightening through Holy Spirit. I shift from striver to receiver. I can relax. I don't have to find all this for myself because I will receive the Spirit of wisdom and of knowledge in the knowing of Him. And how do I know Him? By looking at Jesus, most especially Jesus and what He reveals about God from the Cross. When Jesus gently shows me the marks in His hands and feet, invites me to put my hand in His side, the glory of Who He Is and Who God Is is revealed. My heart is enlightened. I don't have to do tons of Bible study to know that, to have that revealed to me. Oh, I want to, once I see Him for Who He Is, because I want to ingest every scrap of understanding of what that all means for me that I can, but I don't have to have that to have the eyes of my heart enlightened.

Oh, dear. I can't stop myself from getting carried away.

Next - Paul prays that the Ephesians (and we, by extension) might know the hope to which God has called them (us).

I could go on and on about the difference between this hope of which Paul speaks and the way we usually use the word. Yes, and even Paul uses "hope" in that weaker way from time to time, but the hope to which we are called is, well, enormous, vast. In a world that would have us believe that we are too insignificant to be shapers of the future, Paul speaks to us of hope, the kind of hope he attributed to Abraham, through whom God raised up an entire people and through whom God has blessed the entire world. As God invited Abraham to count the stars and then understand the number of his descendants, so Paul says that when the eyes of our hearts are enlightened we too will number our spiritual descendants alongside the stars. That's what Paul means when he says "hope."

Next - Paul says that when the eyes of the Ephesians hearts are enlightened they (and we) will know "what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints."

I would like to draw your attention to one little word. "His." His inheritance. In the saints. It doesn't say "the inheritance He has bestowed on us, the saints." It says His inheritance. And His inheritance is found in you and me. We are His inheritance, purchased on the Cross. And He counts this inheritance as "riches." You. And me. Just let that sing to you. You are His inheritance, the one for whom He gave everything. Okay, so....

Next - Paul prays that, through the enlightening of our hearts, we (I'm tired of writing "the Ephesians") might know "what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward

us who believe.” I’m going to get into prepositions in a moment, but first let’s look into just what power that is, it is, according to Paul, the “great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.” This is the power that is “toward” us. Except that it’s even better than that. Yes, that power has been directed toward us, through the sacrifice of Jesus. The power that raised Him from the dead also raises us, but read in context, that’s not what Paul is praying for. After all, that’s done. But for Paul, this power that is “toward us who believe” is in fact “in us who believe.” The preposition can be translated that way, but most simply the word *eis* in Greek means in, or into. It can be a little scary to realize that God has placed in you and me the same power that He worked in raising Jesus from the dead, but that’s what it says. No wonder the translators when for “toward.” But ponder that truth. It either makes my heart want to burst out of my chest, or makes me want to run and hide.

Next - Paul gives us this exalted image of Jesus who, raised from the dead, is seated high above all earthly powers and dominions. And then he reminds us that we’re in Him. We are His body, we have been placed “in Christ.”

So where He is, we are also. Even if our place in the body is the soles of His feet, we’re still placed above all those principalities and powers.

And that has huge ramifications for how we approach life in general. I find myself too often struggling to push up through the miasma that is life in this world these days. I want to push up to the heights, to get above all this mess just so that I can have one breath of fresh air somewhere, even for a moment.

But this image, when I manage to recall it, changes my perspective. I can see it all, but from God’s perspective, from above. I don’t act to reach this place, I act because I have. It is not as though the pains of this world no longer touch me, that is no more true than that they never touched God. But they do not weigh on me. They do not cloud my vision. I can see God’s victory over all this pain and confusion, even as I work to bring it to birth.

When I am pushing up to reach the place into which God has already placed me I get tired. And in my weariness I become impatient, with myself and with others. But when I see myself where I truly am I do not tire of drawing myself and others upward to share the vision that has come with “the enlightening of my heart.”

Okay. So now I hope you can see why this passage catches me up the way it does. And I pray that some fragment of it has tugged at your heart as well.

Before I go on, I'd like to mention that all this talk of inheritance reminded me that I wrote a series a long time ago that I entitle "Receiving Your Inheritance." I've started transcribing some of that for The Vicar's Keep as well. It has it's own little section.

The Gospel Text

In our reading from Luke for All Saints we find his version of the Beatitudes, followed by a short portion of the teaching that has been called Luke's "Sermon on the plain." This is because instead of having Jesus go up a mountain to give a long set of teachings as Matthew did (evoking images of Moses at Sinai, from which he brought down the Ten Commandments, paralleled by the ten blessings of Matthew's Beatitudes) Luke precedes Jesus' long sermon with these words.

And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all. (Luke 6:17-19, ESV)

We can attribute Luke's decision not to evoke the great prophet Moses to his Gentile background and audience and yet his rendition of the Beatitudes has a stronger Jewish flavor than does Matthew's. While there are fewer blessings in Luke's version, they are paired with a matching set of "woes." This was characteristic of Jewish preaching at the time, and so Luke's version would have rung somewhat more harmoniously in a Jewish ear than Matthew's.

As to the change in location, I personally believe that for Luke, the mountain was Jesus' place of prayer and isolation. The "level place" was His place of encounter.

I'd like to talk for a moment about the "woes." I've done this with other passages in other Divergences, but this is important enough that it bears repeating. And we have enough other voices speaking "woes" that hearing Jesus correctly can be a challenge.

Our tendency, hearing Jesus pronounce these woes over the rich, the full, the laughing, those about whom others speak well, hearing these we may be inclined to hear condemnation. I am inclined to remember the father of a young woman I was fond of back in college, a Baptist preacher, declaring woes over people like me, pounding his fist onto the lectern. (He even stared at me as he did it.)

I don't think that's what Jesus is doing here at all. Rather, hear Jesus' words with these other words to the people of Jerusalem as your guide.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34, ESV)

Now, when you read Jesus naming the woe that the future holds for the people He names, hear that same heartbreak. He isn't damning them. He isn't calling down judgment on them, He is describing what He sees in their future and weeping over them. We do well to keep His illimitable compassion foremost when we read passages like this.

Then Jesus goes on to give the Readers' Digest version of Matthew's teaching about how to live in community, something to which Matthew devotes almost three chapters.

Instead of delving into that shortened version a lot, I'd like to go back to one difference between Matthew and Luke that always catches my attention. For Matthew it reads, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” For Luke it reads “Blessed are the poor.” For scholars who believe that Luke and Matthew used a source they call “Q” (for the German word, Quelle, which means source, or spring) but used it differently, or had different versions of it (thereby accounting for the very large amount of material they share that isn't also in Mark, but which appears differently in the two gospels) for these scholars, Luke's version is considered to be the more “original,” closer to what Jesus probably said. Matthew then is said to have added the words “in spirit.” Perhaps to soften the impact of a blessing on the poor, perhaps for another reason, but many think that Jesus probably didn't say that.

Personally, I am of the school that thinks there was no such thing as Q. I think that Luke used Matthew as one of his sources, but edited it to suit his purposes and his audience. There is a fair amount of scholarly support for this, but I think it is well summed up in a book, “[Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke's Use of Matthew](#).” If you're really curious, or you're having trouble sleeping, I recommend it. (The link is to the book on Amazon.)

Given that, I need to account for Luke's decision to omit Matthew's words, “in spirit.” Many preachers and some scholars from my generation will quickly point to what the say is “God's preferential option for the poor.” While God's concern for the poor and the powerless in Scripture is beyond question, this notion of “preference” is much too deeply rooted in the politicism of the church in the mid-twentieth century, and horribly overlooks God's compassion also for the rich and full and the laughing.

I believe that the reason for omitting “in spirit” is more closely tied to Luke’s concern for the divisions in the early church, most especially those between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This concern of Luke’s drove him to write a second volume (Acts) in which he depicts the importance of the church’s Jewish roots to the Gentile church (Paul’s obedience to Jewish purity requirements and to the Jerusalem conference) and places some of the most offensive moments of Gentile inclusion on the shoulders of Peter (the baptism of the Centurion and his family and the argument in favor of Paul’s mission during the Jerusalem conference).

Luke has as one of his goals with his retelling of a Gospel that is already known, the healing of wounds that are still festering and will continue to grow worse. We have evidence in the early second century of a group of Jewish Christians who still cling to the demand that to be a follower of Jesus one must first convert to Judaism. To them, Paul was anathema. He is described as a devil in some of their writings.

And here’s the hook. They called themselves the Ebionites, which means “The Poor Ones.” The Poor. They chose this name for themselves because they took a vow of poverty. Luke here includes “the poor” among those who are blessed, knowing that his Gentile audience, largely the heirs of Paul’s missionary work, would have known of his most virulent opponents, and he seeks to draw them together.

I have to name the greatest weakness to my theory. And that is that we don’t have any clear reference to a group known as the Ebionites until well into the second century. Luke’s gospel is generally dated between 80 and 100 AD. So the overlap isn’t clear. And here is how I answer that weakness. We do not have a well defined group named in the first century and yet we have ample evidence of Jewish-Christian rejection of Paul’s mission. And we also have Paul’s own collection for “the saints in Jerusalem” (1 Cor. 16:1) which came as Peter’s request that he “remember the poor.” Again “the poor.” And Peter’s request comes immediately in the wake of the Jerusalem convention’s freeing of Paul’s Gentile converts from all but the most basic (Noachic) strictures of the Law. After this he is asked to remember the group that most stringently (stridently?) upheld them.

Luke could have copied Matthew with “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” but he didn’t. Reading this in its historical context helps free us from those horrible interpretations of this text that suggest those who are ground to dust by economic inequality are somehow more “blessed” than the rest of us, as though we ought not to seek to free them from those shackles. Luke had a specific community in mind, one that had *chosen* poverty. Not a group that had had it thrust upon them.

For a more easily printable version of this Divergence, please [CLICK HERE](#).