

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 25, Year C (track one)

First Reading

Joel 2:23–32

“Be glad, O children of Zion,
and rejoice in the LORD your God,
for he has given the early rain for your vindication;
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the latter rain, as before.

“The threshing floors shall be full of grain;
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
I will restore to you the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent among you.

“You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.
You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

“And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

“And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem

there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16-18

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.

At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 18:9–14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house

justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

There are several rabbit trails I could go down in talking about this passage from Joel. We'll see how well I can focus on just one or two!

The first is one that's easy to overlook, but one that is particularly important to me personally. The date and time of Joel's prophecy can't be well established, but he prophesies in the midst of terrible devastation caused by an invasion of locusts that have destroyed the agriculture and economy of the Southern Kingdom. He has equated that destruction with the Judgment of God on a sinful people. He is never clear about the nature of the sin, only that it calls for genuine repentance. (Rend your hearts and not your garments.)

As we begin this week's reading though, Joel's theme shifts from judgment to restoration. All that has been taken away will be returned. The threshing floors will be full with grain, the vats of oil will be full.

And here's the phrase that I'd like you to notice. "I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten." Even lost time will be restored. This phrase was really important to me during a difficult time in my life when I was being restored after going painfully off the rails. I had repented, I knew that I was forgiven. Unburdened, I felt a renewed sense of purpose and vision for my life, but I was plagued with regret. Regret for lost time and opportunity. When my spiritual director and I finally recognized this new attack from the accuser, she brought me to this page in the book of Joel, to this verse.

I will restore to you the years
that the swarming locust has eaten.

This is the promise God holds out to every penitent. Even the time that was lost will be restored to you. I don't understand the whole of it, certainly not the how of it, but I know that in that moment I felt the weight of regret lift from my shoulders and I felt greater freedom to walk into the path that had been laid before me. Perhaps God granted more more productive years. Perhaps I've just been more fruitful in the years given to me

because of the lost time. Maybe it's something else entirely. But whatever the case, the time is not lost.

Okay. One other thing. I said I'd try to keep it to two.

This passage from Joel is probably the one that sounds most familiar to us because Peter quotes a part of it on the Day of Pentecost.

“And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Peter understood that day to have been a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. But a fair number of biblical commentators would quibble with Peter. (I know!)

Read in the context of the rest of that chapter of Joel, we can understand why, I suppose. Joel foresees this outpouring of the Spirit as an immediate precursor to the “great and awesome Day of the Lord.” And as this final day of judgment has not yet fallen upon us, the outpouring at Pentecost could only have been (as one commentator put it) a “foretaste” of the coming of the Spirit that Joel foresaw.

This confusion seems to me to be the result of our inveterate habit of trying to confine God to a timeline that makes sense to us. As I have come to understand it, all those future realities to which the commentators point, those things that haven't happened yet, are already realities in the heart and mind of God. God doesn't do timelines. For God all reality is Now. Those future realities have impact on us now, or can. Indeed, our task as messengers of the Gospel is to bring Kingdom reality to bear on the present as we experience it here. “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

It may seem like I'm the one doing the quibbling here, and perhaps I am, but I think this distinction is important. The coming of the Holy Spirit wasn't just an appetizer to get us ready for the real thing on the Last Day. It is a manifestation of that reality in this moment that we're able to comprehend. It's like the way that some sci-fi writers try to talk about interstellar travel through the “folding” of space. Two impossibly distant points become adjacent, share reality through this folding. Well we, as we place our trust, our faith in the reality that seems future to us fold our timelines so that both present and future occupy the same moment, and miracles happen. The Spirit makes it possible to be understood even though we don't know each others' languages, people are healed, the oppressed are delivered, the dead are raised.

As an Episcopal priest I believe in that miracle of folding time every time I step to the altar to celebrate the Eucharist. We are instructed to do what we do at the altar “in remembrance of me.” This isn’t a mere recalling of some distant past event, but “anamnesis,” a “knowing again” that brings the past *into* the present, so that two moments touch. And it also pulls into the present moment the future reality of the feast of the Wedding of the Lamb. Past, future, present, all entangled with one another as time is bent into the Now of God.

So, perhaps Joel might not have anticipated that Pentecost would be a manifestation of the Last Day, but that doesn’t mean that it wasn’t.

Now that, my friends, is a real rabbit trail. I hope I haven’t completely lost you!

Second Reading

As I read these concluding words to Paul’s letter to Timothy, I hear the pain at his desertion and betrayal, and the faith that makes it all bearable. We can hear him almost reassuring himself that he has done all that was asked of him, and that his devotion has not gone unnoticed.

But I think that “crown of righteousness” that is laid up for him has been twisted into something Paul wouldn’t have recognized. I remember as a college student I was occasionally asked to come and sing at revivals at Baptist churches around Greenville. After one such meeting I was being driven home by a nice older member of that church. On the way she said to me, “Well, you certainly earned yourself another jewel for your crown!” I must have looked as confused as I felt because she went on. “You know, the crown of righteousness you’ll get in heaven! Tonight you added another gemstone to it!” Oh, that.

Paul does not mean that we’re all going to be wearing crowns in heaven. The only “crown” that he looks forward to is the declaration of his righteousness. The righteousness that is his by faith, because he has “loved His appearing.” And I love that the word that is translated appearing in our reading today is “*epiphaneia*.” Epiphany. The showing forth of Christ’s identity and glory and majesty. And the readings of that season often include His revelation to and through Gentiles. Leads me to wonder if there’s a link between this verse from the Apostle to the Gentiles and the naming of that liturgical season.

Gospel Text

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

That teaching echoes throughout the New Testament. Over and over again we find it, and Jesus gives us a parable here to illustrate it. But He doesn't intend that we should all go about our days beating our breasts and refusing to raise our eyes to heaven. This parable and this teaching have been misunderstood in that way in too many corners of Christianity. Either unfortunate believers have been encouraged to repeatedly castigate themselves for sin they might not even be able to name, or some seem to have come to see no purpose in trying to behave righteously, leading Paul to need to say, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” (Romans 6:1-2a, ESV)

It's really just a matter of how we position ourselves before God. Do we stand on our doings, our works? Or on His mercy, His righteousness? There can still be joy in the heart of the ones who place their trust in His mercy. This isn't about breast beating, it's about knowing where your righteousness comes from. The people who know how they stand before God and the Pharisee might look a lot alike actually, in worship. Both are smiling, both are generous. But if you sneak close enough, you can hear the difference in the prayers they mutter. There is “Thank you God for not making me like them!” and then there is “Thank you God for enabling me to do what I couldn't have done on my own!”

You see, the things they do out in the world, they look a lot alike. But there is greater joy in resting in the mercy of God, acting out of mercy received, than there is in taking satisfaction in what is done *in order to* be judged righteous. It is my experience that those who do good *in order to* be found “good” eventually burn out. The pleasure in their good-doing isn't enough to sustain them through the inevitable disappointments and betrayals. And they will come. Those to whom we intend to do good will often fail to appreciate us or what we do. But the one who does what she does out of love for the Mercy in which she is held, this one finds no insult in that disappointment, only sorrow for the other. One who knows she's held in Mercy knows the same concerning the other to whom she ministers. And she knows the pleasure of the Father in whose name she ministers when she acts out of His bounty and not her own.

There is joy and empowerment to be had in seeking to live out of the abundance of mercy that is ours, and this joy and empowerment is what makes true obedience possible. Jesus used a parable. It's never wise to try to make something too literal out of a parable. We aren't intended to go about pounding our chests in misery. We are,

however, intended to live in the joy that comes with being justified by mercy, not by our works.