

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 29/Christ the King, Year C (track one)

### First Reading

Jeremiah 23:1–6

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’ (ESV)

### Second Reading

Colossians 1:11–20

*And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;*

being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the

body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

### Luke 23:33–43

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First (and Gospel) reading

Christ the King Sunday. On some level, for many of us whose countries have cast off monarchy in favor of some sort of representative government, the idea of having a king rings a little discordantly in our ears. We have seen in our own lives and historically how easily power can be abused and the idea of investing all that authority and power in one individual makes our skin crawl. In some of our newer liturgies we have gone so far as to exchange words like “Lord” and “King” for less disturbing images.

And yet our lectionary continues to challenge us with this last Sunday before we begin a new year with Advent. Always the year comes back to this. To Jesus reigning as King. I certainly hope that we never change that.

I hope we never abandon the inescapable biblical image of the One Who Comes as King because we need it. We need a King. Not the king that broken humanity has tried to implement, but a true King. We have not yet shown that we are wise or just enough to rule ourselves in a way that brings true peace and justice to every human on earth. In the end, only a humanity whose wisdom and judgment is submitted to the will of a King like Jesus can carry forward the plan of salvation.

We don't need to get rid of the idea of kings. We need to understand what makes a king, a real king.

And for the sake of that discussion I'm going to pull our first and last lessons together to try to salvage what I think is worthwhile in Jesus' Kingship. Oh, and just so it doesn't take you too much by surprise, I'm even going to throw in some more Girard for good measure.

You know, for much too long I was so self-centered that when I read our passage from Jeremiah today I cringed. All that talk of "shepherds" worried me, shepherds who have scattered God's flock and driven them away. And God dealing with their (my??) evil deeds. And it's understandable, I suppose, to think that God's judgment of "shepherds" might refer to those of us who are given "pastoral" charge over our "flocks."

Imagine my relief then, when I realized that the ones whom God names as "shepherds" over His "flock" were the kings that had been set over them! It's really rather obvious, and it's only a sign of my blindness that I didn't see it earlier. The good "shepherds" that God will set over His people don't function (as pastors) beneath the King who is to come, they are a preface to the Righteous Branch who will come and reign, and restore both Judah and Israel.

Of course this creates echoes in our ears of the words of Jesus, who described Himself as "the Good Shepherd," who gives His life for the sheep. But this image of a "good shepherd" isn't a substitute for that of a king, it is a way of defining what that good King is like. We don't abandon "kings" for "shepherds," we just don't accept kings who don't look like "good shepherds." It might be worth noting here that David, of whom the chosen King will be a descendant, was himself a shepherd.

And the "Good Shepherd" who gives His life for the sheep draws me then to our reading from Luke. I'll begin by pointing out that there is no mention of "Kingship" or "Kingdom" until the very end of the reading. The second thief's understanding is that Jesus has not yet "come into His Kingdom," and yet he recognizes Jesus as a King, naked and dying on a cross. There is something here of John's understanding of the Crucifixion as the moment of Jesus' glorification. Being "lifted up" begins to take on the

flavor of an ascension to a throne. So we add another image of what it means to be a king, to reign from a cross.

Now here is where I'd like to bring in a little more from Rene Girard. I won't go back and try to recap mimetic theory again. If you missed it when I mangled Girard's work to cram it into one "Divergence" last week, you can find that Reader's Digest version in the Divergence for Proper 28, or in the appendix on mimetic theory at the end of "Worship - The Redemption of Desire."

In his book, "Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World" Girard discusses the way that he sees the development of the first monarchies. (I haven't read this in years, so I may get some bits wrong. If I do, please correct me!) Basically it goes like this: In a social grouping in which regular human sacrifice has evolved out of the first murder of the first scapegoat (ritual), the one chosen as the next victim of the sacrifice is afforded extraordinary privileges, sometimes for as long as the entire year prior to their execution. These privileges extend so far as to exercise rule over the people for that time. At some point the intended victim uses their extraordinary authority to displace the sacrificial event onto someone else, another scapegoat, thereby retaining both their life and their authority. And we have our first king.

Now this helps me understand the way that so many crowns have been bestowed by the religious authorities through the ages. Monarchy was derived in and through a religious ritual (sacrifice) that was twisted into a means of obtaining ongoing authority. It also helps me understand why it is that those we put on thrones of any sort, whether a king's chair or a seat of elected power, why it is that we inevitably throw stones at them. (Stoning was a common form of human sacrifice. It enabled/required the participation of all the members of the social unit.) Kings were always meant for sacrifice, and on some level we remember that.

And so we add the image of the sacrificial lamb to the image of what it means to be the King, the Good Shepherd, the Victim on the Cross. Any "king" who doesn't meet all those requirements lacks the qualifications to be called "King." It isn't the quality of the justice dispensed. It isn't the riches poured out to feed and care for the people. It isn't even the *willingness* to die for the people. It is dying for them. That is the portal through which the Good Shepherd ascends His throne. And the roar of the hosts of heaven in response to His passing through that door of agony is like the sound of a thousand Niagras all at once, at once tumultuous and musical, wild and symphonic.

When we sing our praises of the King on this Sunday, our voices will join with the myriads and cause the reverberations of the gathered hosts to shake the foundations of all that is broken in our world, in order to make room for the return of the King.

We don't need to get rid of "kings," we just need to remember what makes a "good king."

## Second Reading

Whew. After that I had to take a break before trying to find anything worth saying about Colossians.

First, just let me say that I added the italicized verses at the beginning to give the reading better context than the one you'll hear read on Sunday morning. As you can see from the real text of the letter, our reading begins in the middle of a sentence. I can't quite figure out why. It wouldn't have been too much simply to add a few verses beforehand, but instead we get something like "May you be made strong," to try to make sense of a dependent clause starting a sentence.

You may also have noticed that this passage from Colossians begins with a passage that sounds a lot like our reading from Ephesians 1 on All Saints. I'm inclined to agree with some scholars who think that this is intentional, that the author (not Paul?) was imitating Ephesians in the opening so as to sound like the Apostle to the Gentiles. I'm not as concerned in this letter with authorship as I was with 1 Timothy, at least not at this point. What we have in this first chapter is sufficiently uplifting that I'm glad to have it, no matter who wrote it.

What is interesting to me in Colossians 1 is that the author's attention shifts from that of Paul in Ephesians after the verses that are so similar. Paul, after verse 1:23 in Ephesians goes on to speak to the Ephesians of the impact on the lives of his readers of the work of Christ. It is community focused.

In Colossians, after describing the way that his readers' standing has changed in Christ, the author goes on to paint this glorious picture of the nature of the One Who Came. The focus is not on the community but on the Glory of Christ. This passage has been called by many the "Christ Hymn of Colossians." (Or something similar.) Indeed, when I read it, I recall the phrase from Revelation, "the hymn of the redeemed." I could spend a lifetime mining the riches of these verses and never exhaust the glories revealed. Even so, I'll try to share a few of my reactions to them.

First - "He is the image of the invisible God."

When I look at this sentence I sense something deeper than just talking about an "invisible" God. "*Aoratos*" (I wish I knew how to render real Greek in a blog..) does

mean “invisible” in a sense, but, at least in a western sense of “invisible” it misses the mark. “Unseen” feels better to me. “Invisible” suggests the impossibility of seeing, “*aorata*” or “unseen” leaves open the possibility that what has not yet been seen may yet be. It is no coincidence that the word for image here, “*eikon*” is the source of our word “icon,” an image through which we see what cannot be seen, an image that re-veals, removes the veil from, that which has not been seen.

I draw from all this the awareness, as terrifying as it may be, the awareness that God has always had a desire to be seen, and that in Jesus He has finally re-vealed Himself. (My spell checker keeps balking at “re-vealed” but I want to emphasize the way that in Jesus draws away the veil, not from Himself but from our eyes, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:16.) I’ve never been particularly adept at the use of icons as meditative aids. I prefer the Bible for some reason. But no matter the source of the “image,” I am told here that I can see God, the God that is beyond my senses, by looking at Jesus. Just filling my eyes with Him.

Second - I want to skip to verse 19 here, then I’ll go back. “For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” All. In Greek, that’s “*pan*.” And *pan*, when we translate it carefully means, well... all. All, every bit. Nothing left over. There is nothing of God that wasn’t present in Jesus. That is why Jesus is “the image of the unseen God.” If there were more to be found than can be found in Him He might re-present God (as we are called to do) but He wouldn’t “re-veal” Him. And of course that has ramifications for how we read the rest of the Bible, how we do all our theology. Nothing can be said of God that cannot be seen, that is not re-vealed in Jesus. (It’s that annoying “all” popping up again!) I love how when I ponder that, the way that it silences all the “yes, but...” thoughts when I try to add some attribute to God I can’t find in Jesus. When I find myself trying to do that I just remind myself again, for the thousandth time, that “all means all.”

Third, and lastly for now, “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”

Let me start with “for Him.” (I know, Him isn’t capitalized in the ESV, but it’s a matter of personal piety that when I type it, I try to remember to capitalize pronouns about God. I don’t think it’s necessary, I just prefer it.)

There are a few ways that the author could have said “for” Him. In the Pauline corpus, the most frequent way to speak of something done for someone, for their sake, as it were, is simply to put the person on the receiving end of the action in the accusative case and use no preposition at all. Or they could have used “*dia*,” which carries the sense of

“through” with it, (and is pretty rare in Paul) but “*dia*” has already been used in this sentence (through Him). Of course, they could have been clever and used *dia* twice. With the genitive it means “through,” but with the accusative it could have meant “for,” but I’m getting carried away.

But our author chose “*eis*” to say “for.” And *eis* is used as rarely for “for” as “*dia*” is. And it carries this semantic sense of “into,” rather than “through.” The only other time I found that Paul used this way of saying “for,” (I know, I don’t think Paul wrote this, but the letter is still written in his style.) it is used of “the free gift of God.” (Romans 5:16)

This is a very long-winded way of getting to this point. Have you ever just given yourself a gift? Done something for yourself just to make yourself happy? Now consider. All of it, all creation, is something something the Son made as a gift to Himself. To make Himself happy. Now imagine if you will the joy you feel when you receive a really thoughtful gift. And now apply that joy to Him as He gazes upon you. Yep. That’s how He feels.

And that, friends, is enough for this week. I think I’m rambling.