

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

First Reading

Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12)

“Cry aloud; do not hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet they seek me daily
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.
‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.
Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?

“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

(If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.) (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 2

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,

nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.) (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 5:13–20

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our passage from Isaiah for this week comes from that portion of the book called “Third Isaiah.” (Chapters 56-66) It is the section of Isaiah that seems to be written with the Jewish people who had returned from exile in Babylon and who were struggling under the weight of the destruction they’d found. But the tone of this part of Isaiah isn’t uniformly encouraging. As with our reading for today there is a mixture of judgment and promise.

One author, writing about the way that “justice” is understood in Isaiah pointed out that in “First Isaiah” (ch. 1-43) the notion of justice is fundamentally about “God’s justice” and the miscarriages of God’s justice that would bring judgment on the nation and the people. In “Second Isaiah” (ch. 44-55), “God’s justice” is essentially focused on the restoration of God’s people. Then in “Third Isaiah” (ch. 55-66) “justice” is a mix of both. Another author, writing about the way that “cult” and issues of justice are linked in Isaiah pointed out that while those three emphases appear different, they’re really not. They are the same “justice” just viewed from different vantage points, from that of the powerful, from that of the powerless, and from those who have been the second and are hoping to return to the first.

Still another author wanted to challenge the notion that this passage stands monochromatically in judgment of “false worship.” I myself was captured by this more compassionate take on the people to whom Isaiah spoke. After all, the author suggested, they did really want to know God and His ways...

Yet they seek me daily
and delight to know my ways

This issue, then, is not that they’re really bad people, but terribly mistaken. They seek God, and attempt to know His ways through ritual. They’re trying, but trying really hard in the wrong direction. They need correction, not more judgment. (The author didn’t say all that, I’m inferring some of it.)

When we read it with this corrective tone, rather than the tone of judgment that is so much more prevalent in the opening chapters of Isaiah, the reading takes on a different flavor, and the closing promise begins to ring more true.

then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the LORD will guide you continually

and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.

How much different might our guidance, our prophetic word to the world sound if we gave them credit for trying as hard as they do, rather than hammering them for being mistaken about their direction?

Second Reading

I'll make some comments about the reading in a broader sense in a moment, but first I'd like to quibble with our translators. Nearly at the end of our reading we have Paul saying, "The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one." Ouch. I have heard that verse misused in a number of cases when someone in spiritual authority came under question. No one has the authority to "judge" someone who is "spiritual." But I don't think that's what Paul is saying at all. Translated the way it is in the ESV (and many other translations - thankfully the NRSV, a translation I usually avoid, doesn't quite fall into this pit) it makes the "spiritual one" immune to criticism.

Here's the NRSV version that many of you will hear on Sunday:

"Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny."

Better, but still unfortunate.

Here's my favorite from among the major translations, this from the New American Standard Bible.

"But the one who is spiritual discerns all things, yet he himself is discerned by no one."

The verb here translated variously as "judges" or "scrutiny" or "discerns" is *anakrino*. In the vast majority of cases in the New Testament our ESV translators use "examine" to translate that word. That is the dominant sense of the word. To look carefully at someone or something with the aim of discerning some truth. And so the translation from the NASB fits much more neatly into the context of Paul's letter here than "judge."

Let me see if I can give the sense that I think Paul's after with a slight paraphrase, setting that verse in a slightly larger context. I think that verse and the surrounding verses are saying,

“The natural one (more literally “soulish” one) doesn't grasp the things of the Spirit of God because they're just foolishness to him, and he can't understand them because they're only spiritually discerned. The spiritual person on the other hand, discerns all things, but he is understood by no one. (Because spirit is only discerned by spirit.) “For who has known the mind of Christ so as to understand him.” But we have the mind of Christ.”

Read properly, I think this troublesome verse avoids much of the misuse to which it might otherwise be put!

The reading from Paul for this week shifts from the discussion of “wisdom” it itself that we had last week to Paul contrasting wise speech (presumably that of others whom he calls “super-apostles” in 2 Corinthians) with his own halting delivery, but one that was accompanied by “demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” Last week I suggested that this might have been a very real reaction to the failure of his own oratorical skills in Athens, where he'd been just before Corinth. Whether or not that was so, he names his reasons for rejecting wise speech this way, “so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

As I write this I'm reminded of a time in college when I became involved with Campus Crusade for Christ. One of the things that Bill Bright, the founder, taught us was that we could lead people to Christ through the strength of logic and reason. I don't know that we ever used those words, but it amounted to the same thing. I don't think we ever studied this part of 1 Corinthians back then. Certainly not in the context of evangelism.

The message of Christianity, the message of the Cross will never make sense to the world. Not in the world's context. Nor should it. When we try to pound the round peg of the Gospel into the square categories of the world it becomes damaged beyond recognition.

Something I do nowadays to keep myself grounded is subscribe to a subreddit (a community on the social media platform called Reddit) called “atheism.” It can be painful at times, in more ways than one. Sometimes the pain comes from being ridiculed for believing “fairy tales.” That hurts, but not nearly so much as when they hold up the foolishness of Christians who try to argue that what we believe “makes logical sense” in a better way than what atheists believe. And there's a lot of that. That is... Christians trying to argue that the Gospel is more logical than atheism.

In a deeper sense, I actually believe that's true. The Cross really does make sense of things in a better way than any lens I know. That's why I'm a Christian. But that's not what you and I share with the world, not at first. Those are matters for deeper discipleship. I tend to believe they're things that only the Holy Spirit can teach effectively. Evangelism begins with setting people free, declaring their new identities in Jesus. Only after someone has come to accept that they are free can we begin to explain why. That's why Paul says in our reading this week, "Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory."

Simple truths, accompanied by "demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Sometimes I think we lean to "wisdom" because we've lost touch with those demonstrations. But that's a conversation for another day.

Gospel Text

(For a brief discussion of the place of these verses in form- and redaction-critical study, please see below. I didn't want to cloud it with stuff I don't think pertinent.)

"Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of **these** commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

So much can turn on a word. In this case, on this word, "these."

Before I get to the meat of the Divergence on Matthew here (and it does feel like quite a divergence to me at this point) I would like to point out one very important thing about what Jesus says here. He differentiates between those who "relax" these commandments and those who don't. But all of them are still "in the kingdom of heaven." Some are great, some are least, but everyone's "in."

Now, about that word, "these."

First, if Jesus is referring to the commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures, the word "these" isn't necessary. In Greek, the phrase "the commandments the least" (*ton entolon ton elachiston*) would have been more than adequate, and a more normal way to say it. There is no need to insert "these" into it at all. The reference would have been clear.

Except that Jesus has just given the Beatitudes and He's just about to give a great many more in the rest of chapters 5-7. So He wants to set "these" commandments apart from, over against some others. And "these" is a demonstrative pronoun that indicates proximity. "Those" is what you say to indicate something more distant. Jesus uses the word for "these," *touton*, not the word for "those," *ekeinon*.

Jesus begins, after the Beatitudes by saying that He has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but rather to fulfill them. That not a dot or an iota of them will pass away until heaven and earth pass away. (Interesting to note, eschatologically, that Jesus anticipates a day when both will pass away.) And since HE is the fulfillment of all those, the commandments He's given, the ones He's about to give, *these* are the commandments that no one is to relax, or teach others to relax. The commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures, *hai entolai*, are so familiar to Matthew's Jewish congregation that the demonstrative pronoun, "these" is more than superfluous. It only makes sense if Jesus intends to differentiate some other commandments from them, the ones He's about to give.

And it's not difficult to imagine the desire to do that in Matthew's congregation. Imagine all the "Yes, but..." reactions there would have been to this: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:21-22, ESV) Jesus is being very clear here that these commandments, the ones He will give, are the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, and no one is to relax or teach others to relax them.

Scholars have argued at some length on the meaning of Matthew 5:17-20. Some see them as a Matthean reaction to Gentile libertinism within his community. Others see it as a response to Jewish accusations of a rejection of *Torah* by the Matthean community, an accusation whose impact is heightened because it stands in the shadow of the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Still others see it as a response to Pauline Christianity, setting some limits on it while not rejecting it entirely.

What I don't read in the scholarship is any suggestion that these words actually came from Jesus. That Jesus Himself understood Himself in this way, and that this subsuming of *Torah* within the framework of His teaching/commandments and interpretation was His. The more I study this, the more I am convinced that it's so.

Yep. That's a Divergence from anything I've ever read on this passage. And what's more, I'm pretty sure it's what was meant when it was given/written.

Okay, just some brief words on the origins of these verses. Modern modes of biblical criticism, form- and redaction-criticism in particular, have largely concluded that this passage attributed to Jesus is the product of the early church, and did not come to us from Jesus Himself. I've located at least one article that casts a little doubt on that, but it's not difficult to see why scholars would look at the Jewishness of Matthew's Gospel, and the way that it's usually read as a defense of the Law and the Prophets (rather than Jesus' direction to take His commandments seriously, as I now read it) and then conclude that, because Jesus broke so many of the purity codes and Sabbath observances dictated by the Hebrew Scriptures, He couldn't have said this. So of course these Jewish believers must have added it. I only wanted to write this little addendum to say that I don't think this discussion of the source of the words matters to the way I read them now. I treat them as inspired, regardless. I even did before I figured out that Jesus is talking about a whole different set of commandments than most people think He means. Regardless, I would not want you to compromise the authority of the words just because scholars think someone after Jesus wrote them.