

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A

First Reading

Acts 7:55–60

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Peter 2:2–10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”

and

“A stone of stumbling,

and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 14:1–14

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

This fifth week of Easter we read the stoning, the martyrdom of Stephen. What we don't read (probably because it's much too long) is Stephen's speech from immediately before, the speech that created this violent reaction.

What strikes me as I ponder this reading for 5 Easter is the difference between the reaction to Peter's speech in Acts 2 and the reaction to Stephen's speech in Acts 7. In both speeches the speaker goes back and makes reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. Peter uses Joel and Psalm 16 to explain what's going on on the Day of Pentecost and Stephen gives his hearers a thumbnail version of nearly all of salvation history, from Abraham to David and even Solomon in defense of his preaching of Jesus as the Messiah. One nets 3000 conversions, the other results in Stephen being stoned to death. At the conclusion of his speech, Stephen says,

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” (Acts 7:51-53, ESV)

And yet in his recitation of God's history with the Jewish people he has said nothing about the persecution of the prophets. It is as though he tags this line on, not to enrage his audience, but as a foreshadowing of what will momentarily happen to him. It feels to me like he's prophesying his own death by recalling persecutions he hasn't enumerated. Almost a “self-fulfilling prophecy?”

Here's the major difference between Peter's speech and Stephen's, at least for me.

Peter is defending the behavior of those who are experiencing an ecstatic infilling of the Holy Spirit. Peter highlights specific prophetic texts.

Stephen is defending his preaching of Jesus by setting it in the context of prophets who also preached Jesus, though they had not known Him. Stephen doesn't highlight prophecy, but the way prophets were treated. (Even if it's only at the end.)

This difference draws me back to something Paul says in 1 Corinthians.

“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. (1 Corinthians 2:4-5, ESV)”

Peter's speech is grounded in a demonstration of the Spirit, and of power. Stephen's is grounded in human wisdom, human interpretation of Scripture. One brings change of heart, the other brings rejection.

Just my thoughts...

Second Reading

I remember preaching on this text, my first year in the parish where I was called as the curate. I preached on what it means for all of us to be a "royal priesthood." I also remember being scolded by my rector at the time for "confusing the congregation" about the priesthood. He was really angry with me.

I'd like to write about that this week, but I'm not going to because something else caught my eye as I was thinking about this text from 1 Peter. It's this sentence of his:

"They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do."

It could just as easily be translated, "They stumble because they *disbelieve* the word, as they were destined to do." In fact, it can more easily be translated that way. We disobey commands, not words. The verb translated "disobey" here, *apeitho*, can mean disobey, but it also means to distrust, to disbelieve.

This is indicative to me of the way that we constantly want to boil down the Gospel to a set of rules to be obeyed. I checked several different versions of the Bible and they all translate it that way, but really, folks, it needn't be. I can be so much more enlightening than that.

We stumble because we believe the wrong things, because we fail to put our trust "in the Word." (It's "logos" here.) All behavior, all obedience springs from what, whom we believe in. But we want to focus on the flower of obedience, not the root of belief. I went through all the other occurrences of *apeitho* in the New Testament and all but a very few of them the better translation was "disbelieve." There were several others, though, where the translators chose "disobey."

They stumbled, because they do not believe the Word.

Gospel Text

“Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

If you read these “Divergences on the Lectionary” long enough you will tire of hearing me say this, but it is so incredibly important that I keep saying it, to be sure new readers will get it.

If you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. There’s nothing more left to see. Anything you see in the Bible that doesn’t look like Jesus is not of the Father. Any time you’re tempted to say, “Yes, but what about...” and point to something in Paul or in the Hebrew Scriptures that isn’t found in Jesus, you’re not pointing to something Jesus missed about the Father, you’re pointing to something the human authors got wrong about God.

I wrote a whole little booklet on this, on “How to Read the Bible,” and you can find it on [The Vicar’s Keep](#). Click that title to open the PDF of that booklet in another tab. I believe that we can treat every word of the Bible as inspired and still not treat some of it as an accurate depiction of God. I work that out for you in that booklet.

This is a really short reflection on John 14, but it’s really, really important. If we don’t get this one thing right, we’ll miss the mark in our reading of so much else that’s in the Bible.

Next time this reading comes around I’ll write more, because there’s a lot of gold to be mined in this passage.

But this one tiny section is the refiner’s fire that allows us to separate the gold from the dross.