

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

First Reading

Acts 2:42–47

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Peter 2:19–25

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 10:1–10

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

This week I want to draw attention to the way that Luke’s second volume functions alongside other literature of its era. Last week I made mention of the way that Acts uses conventions found in the “historical novels” of its day. It turns out that since I wrote that thesis on Acts’ genre as a means of identifying Luke’s audience, a ton of work has gone into the literary study of Luke-Acts.

So this week, I’d like to point to some of the universalist and utopian themes common to the Greek-influenced culture of Luke’s time, and the way that he used them to set Christianity in relationship to them, but apart and above.

While the Pentecost event isn’t part of our reading, it’s the first part of the chapter from which our reading is taken, and sets the background for it. The list of nations represented on that day demonstrates the true universalism of Christianity. This universalism was characteristic of Dionysian religion of that day. And Dionysian religion included ecstatic prophecy (per Philo). But this similarity to Dionysian religion carried some disadvantage. Dionysiac rites were often criticized for drunken excess, a criticism also leveled at Christianity by Pliny the Younger, who called it a “depraved and excessive superstition.” The mistaken perception of the disciples as “drunk” on the day of Pentecost and Peter’s declaration that this is not drunkenness by the manifestation of that which was prophesied by Joel serves as a correction to this criticism.

But the greater correction lies in our reading for this week. Luke has desired that his readers understand that Christianity is the true manifestation of the universalism valued by Dionysian followers, but he has to do more than evade the critique of excessivism. He wants to set Christianity above that ideal, and he does so by shifting his focus from Dionysian rites to philosophic utopianism, particularly that of Plato. I discovered this week that there is pretty clear literary dependence of some sections of Acts on the works of Plato and his utopian ideals which were based essentially on reason and rationality.

These last verses of chapter 2 in Acts show that the early Christian community had realized what Plato had envisioned. This insulates the community against the criticism of Dionysian excess, but also sets it above the Platonic ideal. This would be because the rationality on which Plato's utopia depends was really only available to the philosopher-king, to the upper class, while in the Christian community it is shared by all. Furthermore, Christian community is characterized by communal welfare, which further transcends Greek notions of "friendship" (that's really another topic I daren't try to get into this week) that also include shared goods, but is limited to sharing among one's social equals.

And I would add my own observation to these studies of Luke's use of contemporary themes and ideas. For Luke, it is the Holy Spirit that makes possible the realization of all of this. What ecstasy seeks in Dionysian religion, that is, prophecy and universalism, Holy Spirit accomplishes without the accompanying libertinism. The utopia that depends on philosophy and reason Holy Spirit brings into being without the class limitations of Plato or Aristotle.

It may be disturbing, to read that Luke's writing is so closely related in places to the literature and thought of his era, but I don't find it so. As I said last week, this is a theme I find throughout Scripture. The Gospel expresses itself contextually. It recognizes the deepest desires of the human heart manifest in culture and then shows the way that these desires have always been for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as realized in Jesus of Nazareth. There is no denial of the uniqueness of our proclamation here. On the contrary, this is an affirmation that the One we proclaim is at the center of every great human endeavor, even when He's not yet recognized.

Second Reading

I have heard it said that, "If your faith isn't making anyone mad, you're not doing it right." Unfortunately, I think that's a saying made up by some Christians whose faith is so obnoxious they choose to take pride in their rejection rather than approach it with some humility. And yet, that seems to be almost what Peter is saying in this portion of his epistle. Almost, but not quite. It is clear that the early Christians to whom he writes are indeed suffering for their faith (I've talked about that some for the last two weeks' Divergences.) but it is one thing to accept suffering with grace and another to take indigestible pride in it.

One of the best examples of this in my experience is Heidi Baker, Mama Heidi. Heidi and her husband followed a leading of the Lord to minister in Mozambique, and since they went they have taken in tens of thousands of orphans and planted well over ten

thousand churches. In the beginning, their focus was on the children, and their ministry was under constant pressure from locals and the government. When they went to Mozambique, Christianity was almost unknown, and what was known was unpopular. The government kept closing her down, taking away the children, taking away their property. At one point, someone even hired someone to kill her.

But they ministered on, through poverty, disease (I think I remember a cholera outbreak), and persecution. And Mama Heidi remained humble, even toward those who persecuted her and her mission. (You can read more about Heidi at IrisGlobal.org) She didn't set out to make people mad, but the Gospel threatens all sorts of unjust systems, and when we preach it, folks whose lives are tied up with those systems will be upset. And we will suffer for having done nothing wrong, as Peter suggests. And if we are in the right place in our relationship with Jesus, we will be like Him, like Heidi. "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

There are a fair number of very vocal Christians today who feel persecuted, but who cannot, will not accept suffering innocently with grace. If looking to Jesus' example doesn't convince others that these complainers do not really know Him, perhaps 1 Peter will.

Gospel Text

Okay, shameless self-promotion time. Not really. That is, I'm a little ashamed, but I'm going to plug my book here anyhow.

In this week's reading from John, Jesus speaks of sheep who recognize their shepherd's voice and follow Him. In the midst of hundreds of voices that clamor for our attention, how are we to discern which one his His? How do we come to know His voice?

One teacher I heard told me that in the old days, before we had computers to sort these things out, Secret Service agents (they're the ones who seek out counterfeiters) learned to recognize counterfeit bills by studying real ones. They studied them so frequently, so thoroughly that when they saw a fake bill they just recognized it as fake, perhaps without even understanding at first why it looked "wrong." This teacher went on to say that the way we learn to discern Jesus' voice, or the Father's voice, our Shepherd's voice, is by listening to it, over and over and over again until we just *know* it when we hear it.

Back then I was writing a weekly email to several hundred people across the country, most of them in the Brotherhood of St. Andrew, but not all. When I had come to a place in my life where I could hear and rejoice in the voice of my Shepherd, my Father, I

started writing about it in my weekly emails. This went on for 16 or 17 weeks, after which a number of my readers asked me to make them into a book. I resisted. I'm barely disciplined enough to generate these Divergences each week and I wasn't much better then. And I was in a full time position. But I finally relented and took 16 of those weekly reflections and added five more daily reflections to each one and made it all into a small book. A devotional, really.

I self-published it on Amazon and I sold a few copies. Maybe a few hundred in total. I gave away a lot of them. I still think it's a good guide to learning to discern the Father's voice.

I published the paperback edition in 2009. Since then several other books by the same title have appeared on Amazon. I guess named a need. But I never wanted to make money on it, just share the wonders that I'd learned with others.

So when I started up The Vicar's Keep, one of my goals was to make the book available here. For free. And now it is.

In the process of re-editing it for this website I discovered that we'd missed a lot of errors in the paperback. Now, I had three people read it before I published it, one of them a serious editor. It isn't easy letting three people tell you everything you've done wrong in an effort like this, especially the real editor who told me that I used commas like I use salt, the more the better. Anyhow, even after all of that I was embarrassed, going through the text again to fix it up for The Vicar's Keep and finding spelling, punctuation, grammatical mistakes.

I probably have still missed some things, but it's better. And it's free. You can read it online now at <https://vicarskeep.com/hearing-his-voice/> . If you'd prefer to be able to carry it around, it's still available on Amazon, and I've taken the newly edited version and made a Kindle book out of it.

“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”
Hearing Him call you by name is a joy you'll never surpass in this lifetime. I commend the effort to learn how.