

Divergence on the Lectionary - Good Friday (All Years)

First Reading

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted.
As many were astonished at you—
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—
so shall he sprinkle many nations.
Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand.

Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors. (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 10:16–25

“This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws on their hearts,
and write them on their minds,”

then he adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (ESV)

Or

Hebrews 4:14–16, 5:7-9

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 18:1-19:42

When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed

him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. So he asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go." This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one." Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him. First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.

Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. The servant girl at the door said to Peter, "You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said." When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered him, "If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?" Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered him, "If this man

were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, “See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.” So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.” When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.” So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. Now it was the day

of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

"They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did these things, but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. For these things took place that the Scripture

might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our reading from Isaiah for Good Friday comprises what is known as the Fourth Servant Song. We’ve examined the Servant Songs at some length as we traveled through Epiphany and Lent, encountering all four of them at one point or another. We’ve talked about the identity of the Servant of God in the songs. We’ve talked about how important it is to keep in mind that the prophecies concerning the Servant had meaning to the people to whom they were given, meaning that isn’t blotted out by our own Christological interpretations. In other words, the answer to the question, “Was Isaiah prophesying about someone in his own time or about Jesus?” is “Yes.”

Scholarly discussion of the Fourth Song of the Servant is complicated by the fact that it reads so differently from the first three. For one thing, we have all the “we” references. To whom do the “we/us” passages refer? In our own discussions I’ve said that I lean toward a collective understanding of the Servant, as an identification with Israel/Zion rather than an individual, but if that’s the case, then who is this “we?” For another thing, this is the only one of the songs wherein the Servant dies. This clearly rules out any idea that the author of the Servant Songs (Isaiah) refers to himself.

In addition, this passage from Isaiah 52-53 shows signs of editing/corruption in its transmission. These small but significant changes may well be indications of the way that the text was received during its history among the Jewish people, at different stages of their movement from captivity in Babylon to return and then rebuilding.

What seems very likely, judging from the emendations to the text, is that during and after the period of exile the people of Israel read the Servant as a reference to themselves

collectively, in one way or another. At the same time, they likely also read the “we” portions of 52:13-53:12 as referring to themselves. Likely, but not certain. This passage has offered scholars numerous challenges since the late 19th century.

I am not an Old Testament professor, though I suppose I write as though I am sometimes. I cannot begin to bring a century and a quarter of Servant Song scholarship into coherent focus for you in these Divergences, though I would really like to. I can’t even do that for myself.

What I can do is try to infuse you with a sense of the inexhaustible wealth of these texts for those who’ll dive into them. I read them from an unapologetically Christian perspective. In the Suffering Servant of YHWH I see Jesus, whom I believe Isaiah foresaw, but dimly. But the more time I spend with these texts the more richly I understand that Isaiah’s vision for his own people lives just as vibrantly in these same words. It is the juxtaposition of those two truths that leaves me breathless, that God can and does speak in a given time for both the moment at hand and also for a day yet to come. In equal measure and with equal if different meaning.

I’ll let Isaiah close for himself.

Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Second Reading (both alternatives)

The Letter to the Hebrews occupies a singular place among New Testament texts. It is built almost entirely on a framework of quotations from or allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures. While all the books of the New Testament show familiarity with and make reference to the Hebrew Scriptures, none of them is an exposition based so thoroughly on them. In the one letter there are (according to which scholar you read) from 26 to nearly 40 different quotes and references.

For the most part, scholars agree that the author of Hebrews usually uses the Septuagint (The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, hereinafter the LXX) as his reference text. But there are two different versions of the LXX, and he appears to use both, depending on which text best fits his purposes. At other times he appears to be referring to the Masoretic text (MT) when it suits him. At other times, he just seems to alter the LXX a little in order to make his argument. (Though some scholars suggest that there were likely other versions of the LXX of which we don't know, and that he might be quoting those.)

In his letter, the author of Hebrews uses methods of interpretation common to Jewish interpreters of his age, with one notable exception. Philo and his school used allegory as a primary tool of interpretation, and Hebrews has none of it. It was so widespread in that time that its exclusion seems to be quite intentional. The author's willingness to slightly alter some texts to suit his purposes was also known in that day. The writers of the Qumran texts (Dead Sea Scrolls) also did this, though they limited that freedom to the "Writings" and the "Prophets." No such freedom was demonstrated with the "Law."

One of those places where Hebrews quotes the Prophets, but doesn't conform to either of the known versions of the LXX is one that is quoted in our first option for Good Friday. So of course I had to go dig out my copy of the LXX and compare for myself. (Since none of the articles I found did it for me, they seemed to take it for granted that I knew.)

I found two differences, one small, one a little larger. First the larger one.

Where in Hebrews we have, "I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," the Greek of the LXX (Jeremiah 31:33) just says, "I will put my laws on their hearts." The Hebrew text (MT) says the same. This raised for me the question, "Why add that there?" I don't say this with any great certainty, but this is the answer I came up with. The word for mind here, "*dianoia*," is the same word used when Jesus teaches the summary of the law. "And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your *mind*. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'" (Matthew 22:37-40, ESV. It's the same in all the synoptics.) I think there's a connection. I'm not certain how strong, just a connection.

The other smaller change is the word translated "declares," in "declares the Lord. The LXX uses the word "*phesin*" where the author of Hebrews used "*legei*." *Phesin* is a form of a word used to introduce a quotation of Scripture, while *legei* speaks more directly

about the words of the Lord. One quotes the Scriptures, the other quotes God. I think he meant it to be stronger.

There are several other allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures in the remainder of the first alternative, and in the second. My Bible has them marked with little lettered footnotes. I could just list them all here for you (and maybe some day I will) but today I'd rather encourage you to dig into your own Bibles. Find the little notes and look them up. See for yourself how often Hebrews makes reference to the Hebrew Scriptures.

Gospel Text

As with Palm Sunday there is too much here to try to write a comprehensive "Divergence." But I'll come back to it each year and add something, I'm sure, and slowly build on it. This year I'd like to focus on just a few specific things that set John's Passion Narrative apart, but before that, something more general.

The entire tone of John's Passion is different. Indeed, the whole Gospel reads differently, but we're focused on the Passion right now. I have said in other Divergences that deal with John that I don't agree with many NT commentators who attribute the differences between John and the Synoptics to John's later date and the theological reflections of the Johannine community on the identity of the "Son." Yes, there are elements of John's Gospel that show the signs of later redaction, but that doesn't mean that the core of the Fourth Gospel is less reliable historically. On the contrary, John is the only Gospel that makes any claim to a first-person witness to events that it relates, the memories of "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

Personally I believe that many of the things that Jesus said about Himself that are not recorded in the synoptic Gospels are due to those memories - things He said in the company of those closest to Him that He did not say to the crowds and were therefore not recorded in the sources used by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The same principle holds true in the Passion as recounted by John. There are conversations we hear in this version that don't have any close correlate in the other Gospels. But we also see in John that there was someone present, the "other disciple" who was known to the High Priest and could therefore gain admittance for Peter. Clearly this nameless disciple could move in the circles that would have had knowledge of the things that John relates, even if he himself had not heard them. Again, personal opinion here, but I identify this "other disciple" in his namelessness with the other nameless disciple in the latter half of the Fourth Gospel, the Beloved Disciple. This, I believe, is why we see and hear things in John that aren't told in the Synoptics.

A couple of things from the early portion John's account that jump out at me.

First, we noted on the Third Sunday in Lent that in John's Gospel, Jesus refers to Himself with the phrase, "I am." Here, in the last moments of His life, He does it again as the soldiers close in on him in the garden. He asks who it is they're looking for, and when they tell Him they seek Jesus of Nazareth, He responds, "I am." "*Ego eimi*." Our translation reads, "I am he," and that's not really wrong, but it masks the impact of the words that are actually recorded. I AM. Small wonder that at those words those who had come to arrest Him drew back and fell to the ground.

Then John gives us this extra tidbit when Peter draws his sword and strikes off the ear of the servant of the High Priest. We are given the servant's name, Malchus. This suggests two things to me. First, that our source, the unnamed disciple who ran in the High Priest's circles might have known Malchus, and could therefore name him, but more likely to me is that this servant became at some point a member of the Johannine community, and became known, by name, to them. Perhaps it is some of both. We are told in Luke that Jesus healed the man whose ear had been cut off. That certainly might have been enough to make him a believer!

In years to come I'll add more to this study on the Johannine Passion, but for now I'm going to leave it at this.

I pray for you a most Holy of Good Fridays.