

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

First Reading

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Peter 1:17–23

And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 24:13–35

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our first reading this week is the conclusion of Peter’s “sermon” or speech on the Day of Pentecost. Last week I pointed to the way that Peter explained to his Jewish hearers that the events they were witnessing were prophesied by Joel and then, by interpreting

Psalm 16 in an unprecedented way, showed that Jesus, who had been crucified, was both the Messiah and “Lord.”

This week’s conclusion to the speech answer the question raised by Peter’s hearers. “Then, what do we do?” or, as I am often wont to say, “So what?” Peter’s answer? “Repent (that is, change your way of thinking) and be baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. (That is, trust that Jesus’ death and resurrection is indeed God’s provision for your sins.)”

It’s also worth noting that this short speech and reply to the gathered listeners’ questions wasn’t all it took to get all of them to be baptized. Luke tells us that Peter “... with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them..”

When I take time to think on these words of Peter’s I am struck by two things.

1) The process of stepping into new life is remarkably simple. It simply means changing our thinking and trusting that God has made provision for our sin. That change makes immeasurable difference. It lifts burdens from our shoulders and sets us free. Free from the ravages of sin, free from fear, free from wrath, and...

2) As simple as it is, it’s not easy. It required “many other words” from Peter to bring those 3000 to faith. The talons of guilt are deeply embedded in our flesh. The chains of “works” that bring us righteousness are heavy and incredibly strong. To lay those down is hard. To say to the bird of prey that feasts on us, “Leave!” is terrifying. We simply do not know how to live without those burdens that we thought were bulwarks.

My experience has been that it took “many other words” to bring me to a place where I could lay down the things I’d used to structure my life and choose to live a life of trust. (One that I’m still working on, mind you...) And those words were gentle. I heard them from counselors, from friends, and most especially from Jesus. It was always a gentle invitation, not a forceful word of direction. And with time and patience those who spoke into my life led me to trust, almost in spite of myself.

There are many out there like me who claim Jesus but who haven’t yet changed their thinking, learned to trust and live from freedom instead of for freedom. There are many others for whom the name of Jesus is almost anathema because of the harsh words of those who preach from anger and fear in His name. It will take many other words, many other gentle words, for them to hear the invitation rather than the condemnation that has been their bulward/burden. Many other words.

Second Reading

There is something easily overlooked in this week's reading from 1 Peter, something I want to bring to your attention. It's a truth about God's plan of salvation that is only revealed in small moments here and there. It's a truth that I think can be derived through simply grasping God's heart for humankind, but it is rarely spoken of.

Peter describes this truth this way, "He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God." Peter says this of Christ, the spotless lamb. What this means is that God's provision for human sin was in place before He ever set two subatomic particles next to one another to create the first speck of matter, before the foundation of the world.

John (the one who wrote Revelation, not the evangelist) understood this and alludes to it when he writes of those whose names are written in "the book of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." (Rev. 13:8) Some translations like to turn the word order around to "written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. They do this, I suspect to get it to mimick what is in Rev. 17:8, where John writes specifically of those whose names were "not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world." That's fine, but it doesn't really change the meaning. It is the "book of life of the Lamb who was slain." If names were written in it from the foundation of the world (Let's not go there today...) it remains that this was the book of life of the Lamb who was slain, even at the foundation of the world.

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians also alludes to this reality in chapter 3 when he writes, "Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is *the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God*, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 3:7-11a, ESV)

We talked last week about the dominant theme of 1 Peter, how Peter writes to encourage early believers who are experiencing great suffering, and to give them hope and joy in the midst of it. This little phrase doesn't seem to contribute that much to Peter's purpose, but it is one of those small phrases in the New Testament that cry out for attention.

We tend to think of God's plan of salvation as somewhat linear. That is, God created humankind, that didn't work out so well, so God tried again with Noah. That didn't seem

to last either so God tried calling Abraham out of a polytheistic, pagan land to try something else. Then there was the time of slavery in Egypt. Then God led His people out of that to Sinai, and before things could get started, they'd made a golden calf! Then the time in the desert, the Judges, the Kings, the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the exile in Babylon, the Greeks, the Maccabees, the Romans, then, what, God got it right? Of course not.

What we find in this *Heilsgeschichte*, "salvation-history," is the steady revelation of the mystery, hidden for ages in God. And that mystery? The Cross. The Spotless Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Colossians speaks of Jesus as the One "in whom all things hold together." What that means to me is that if we could look at the fundamental building blocks of creation, we'd see Jesus, but we'd see Him on the Cross, the glory of God.

And here we have Peter, the fisherman, the man with little learning, revealing the Truth that undergirds all truth.

Gospel Text

I am very fond of the story of Clopas and his friend as they walk home to Emmaus in dejection on the third day following Jesus' death. Because this story appears every year on the Third Sunday of Easter, it's a little difficult not to fall back on the things I've said in decades' worth of sermons. So I did some digging to get the "little gray cells" stirring and I came to two different articles whose points of view I'd like to share with you as new starting points for reflection on the Road to Emmaus.

The first is one that reminded me that Luke, among all the evangelists, is the one for whom literary genre is the most important. What I mean by that is that none of the other Gospels shows as much indebtedness to its contemporaneous literary types as does Luke. The other three Gospels show some signs of relationship to other forms, but the "gospel" as a genre is less dependent on them than Luke appears to be.

I am drawn back to this approach to Luke's Gospel by an article that I read discussing the resurrection appearances in Luke 24 and their relationship to "ghost stories" that were common in the literature of the period. This seemed important to me because I wrote my honors thesis in seminary on what we can learn from the larger questions of Luke's genre. It is clear, looking at Luke and Acts in this larger way that the evangelist really did structure his two volume work in a way that evokes a genre of popular literature from his era, something akin to our "historical novel." (I may one day try to reconstruct that paper, but it is lost to me these days. We've moved too many times and I can't turn it up anywhere.) There are certain themes and conventions from those

popular novels of Luke's time that he uses to structure his own re-telling of the story of Jesus and the disciples.

This is not terribly important except that it gives us valuable information as to Luke's intended audience. That is, they were literate, relatively well educated, and had a world-view shaped by Greco-Roman culture.

Luke both used and undermined that world-view by using forms familiar to them. In the story we have this week, he knows that his audience will read the resurrection stories against the background of contemporary works that included "ghost stories." His telling of this story and the one that follows with the larger group of disciples actually break most of the conventions that his readers would have expected of such a story.

By telling the stories in a way that evokes stories his audience has likely read, and then setting this story apart from them, he sets his story *above* them. Jesus is clearly *not* a ghost. He speaks, He eats, He appears at a time of day that is uncommon to "ghost stories."

In this way I see Luke contextualizing the Gospel in a way that's instructive. It reminds me of Paul's speech in the Areopagus, in which he begins with symbols that are familiar to his audience (altars to an unknown god) and then explains the way that this symbol is in fact an imperfect attempt to express the truth revealed in Jesus. Luke does something of the same with his use of literary shapes that were known to his audience.

Knowing that Luke does this, that God led him to do this, and that God further led the church to enshrine that approach in the Bible tells me that as someone who's called to evangelize in this day, one of my tasks is to grasp the symbols and forms that shape the world-view of the people to whom I'm speaking, and honor that, begin from that place. I don't reduce my message to those forms any more than Luke did to the ghost stories of his age, but I honor the hunger that produced them and then show how the Gospel speaks a better word than they do.

I hadn't intended to go on that long on the first of the two things I found when I was reading this week. Maybe I can keep this second one shorter.

The other author whose work struck me took note of something I'd overlooked. Jesus' appearance to the two on the way to Emmaus *precedes* His appearance to the eleven. In doing this Luke also creates some independence for the proclamation of the Gospel from that of the disciples with the greatest authority in Jerusalem. Others have their own experience of the Risen Jesus, He who opens to them the Scriptures so as to make plain the way they point to Him.

This is important in the context of what I believe to be one of Luke's larger purposes, healing the growing rift between Jewish (Jerusalem) and Gentile (Pauline) Christians. It indirectly validates Paul's independent revelation of Jesus and his preaching of the Gospel as a result.

Having said that, I am practically driven to add this. There are a lot of voices allegedly speaking in the Name of Jesus these days who would claim the same sort of independent authority. Too many of them preach a Jesus I don't recognize. I don't think that Luke's purpose here grants these voices the same authority that Clopas and Paul have. Their proclamations were tested by the church over a very long time before they were fully accepted. They preached a Jesus to whom the Hebrew Scriptures gave witness, they did not preach a Jesus who gave witness to the Hebrew Scriptures as though they carried His authority. Even in Matthew Jesus calls His hearers to a "higher righteousness." I would just say, "Test the private revelations" that others stand on. Test them against the Jesus revealed in Scripture.