

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

First Reading

Acts 17:22–31

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”

Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Peter 3:13–22

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those

who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 14:15–21

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

There has been a lot written about Paul's speech to the Athenians. Most of what has been written (from my cursory examination of a lot of essays) view this oration as, to one degree or another, the creation of Luke. This isn't to say that Paul did not speak to the crowd at the Areopagus, only that Luke has allowed his own concerns in composing his two-volume work to shape the way that he relates Paul's speech. The more I read, the more difficult it is to resist these conclusions.

That bothers me because I have long cherished this moment in Paul's career, addressing the intellectual elite in the heart of Hellenistic culture. I did draw some comfort from

one author's survey of the literature when he said that there was a general consensus that "there was nothing in the speech that Paul could not have said."

What he was driving at was that, while what *is* there doesn't contradict anything Paul probably thought or said, there *are* several theological themes (*theologoumena*) that are basic to Paul's thought that don't appear. I won't get into those specifics (but if you ask in the comments, I'll go back and dig them up) because I'd rather take that point on. It is entirely believable to me that Paul would have chosen to focus his speech on themes and ideas that were well known to his hearers, rather than a reiteration of his proclamation of the Gospel as he'd shaped it for other groups. So that absence doesn't trouble me as it does some scholars.

What I picked up in my studies for this week is the way that this speech builds on a theme I talked about in the Divergence two weeks ago (4 Easter), the way that Luke sets the Christian proclamation up as superior to that of the philosophers popular in his day. In particular, this speech incorporates several terms common to the teachings of Socrates. One author went so far as to say that Luke sets Paul up as the Christian Socrates (who was always involved in dialogue/argument with the philosophers of Athens, and was also accused by them of introducing "new gods."). This speech then functions as a kind of "mock trial" between Christianity and pagan religion and philosophy.

That's all well and good, and I do think that Paul might have intended to take on that same role to some extent. After all, he was raised in a thoroughly hellenized culture, and could well have been conversant in more than the Scriptures and the Rabbis.

But Luke is very forceful in his portrayal of Paul as this "Socrates *redivivus*." And that leads me to ask, "Why? How does this portrayal fit into Luke's overarching purpose in bridging gaps between Jewish and Gentile Christians?" (That's my personal opinion of Luke's understanding of his goal. Take that for what it's worth.)

Here are my thoughts on that.

By the time of Luke's writing, Gentile Christianity was largely ascendent over its Jewish sibling. Many years earlier Paul had to deal with the way that this manifested, in both Corinth and Rome. It became important, then, for Luke to thoroughly subsume the best of Hellenistic culture, especially its philosophy, *beneath* the umbrella of the Gospel. He has elsewhere affirmed over and over again the way that the new religion the Gentiles have found in Christianity is beholden to its Jewish roots. Here, I see Luke saying, "You bring some good things to the table (philosophy) but don't get too proud. This Jewish Jesus and his Jewish followers are the perfecters of your philosophy." Luke, in the run

up to the speech adds a condemnation of the rampant idolatry that surrounded Paul in Athens. I just feel Luke putting some very proud Gentile Christians in their places, teaching them some humility.

All that build up for one paragraph of “so what.” I hope it’s helpful.

Second Reading

This week, as I wondered what to write about our reading from 1 Peter, I was moved to go and look more closely at the Greek. Sometimes, when nothing jumps at me from the text I go there to see if I can find something to say.

I did find a couple of interesting tidbits that seem to be worth sharing, so I’ll offer those here.

First, in verse 14 we find, “But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,” Does anyone else find it odd that the verse ends mid sentence (in English)? I do. I didn’t really pay that any mind, though, until I looked at the Greek and realized that the sentence ends with verse 14 and that 15 begins a new one. Or at least it could be that way and that this reading actually makes a little more sense.

Here’s how I’d translate this verse. “But also, if you might (in the weakest sense of “might”, this is the optative mood) suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed (note, no period here), not fearing or being troubled by them.”

That word that we add in English, “should” in the ESV, “might” in my translation is just the result of the verb for suffer being in the optative mood. Here’s the thing about the optative mood. It’s the weakest of the conditional moods in Greek (we only have the subjunctive mood for that) and on top of that, the optative mood carries the sense of wishfulness. So when Peter speaks of the possibility (however weak) that his readers “might” suffer for righteousness’ sake, it almost sounds as though this were something to be wished for (again, only weakly).

Then Peter goes on to say that they *are* blessed if this happens, and then describes the blessing, being unafraid and untroubled. There is no need to insert some future sense into that sentence by saying “You will be blessed.” That makes it sound as though the blessing follows at some future time *after* the suffering. There is no verb here, only the adjective, blessed. The same *makarioi* that Jesus uses in the beatitudes, where He also speaks without any verbs. “Blessed the poor.” There is a strong sense that the two are

contemporaneous. Yes, for Peter, these are contemporaneous in an imagined *future*, but if we're going to add a verb like "will be" I think we also need to add "in that moment."

Reading this verse, in this way, I get the strong sense that this thing Peter is saying is prophetic in nature. That is, he is releasing the possibility of blessing within suffering for his readers by speaking it (or in this case, writing it) to them. It isn't that this couldn't have happened, had he not written it, but it might have been missed. That's part of how prophecy (in a New Testament sense) works. It releases possibility by naming it. It releases blessing by naming it.

It isn't too surprising then, that our translators missed this, and put the second half of this sentence of Peter's into a new one and added what can only be read in English as the imperative mood "Have no fear..." (an imperative that is utterly absent from the Greek).

It has been spoken over us, as it was over Peter's readers, that we will find blessing in the midst of suffering. We aren't commanded not to fear, we are released from fear by this prophetic word.

Okay, second, and I'll keep this one (relatively) short.

In verses 18-20 Peter talks about those to whom Jesus also spoke at some other time, who were "disobedient" (not really). But the translation makes rather a mash of that.

This is how I'd read verses 18-20. "Because Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, put to death in the flesh but alive in the Spirit, in which to the spirits in prison He proclaimed (preached), the unbelieving ones. At some other time, when when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while it was being prepared - the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were saved through water."

First of all, this "because" is explaining why we're blessed in the midst of suffering. It isn't an explanation of why we *should* (that pesky imperative that isn't there) have no fear, but why we *will* have no fear, because Christ did it first.

Next, our translation has something about Jesus preaching to them because they were disobedient. Well, first of all there's no causal word in that Greek at all. Peter uses a participle to just name these "disobedient" ones. It belongs to the sentence before it. The participle is a clarification of who the ones in prison are. And it probably shouldn't be translated as "disobedient ones" either. The Greek verb *apeitho* can be translated as "disobey" but can also be translated as "disbelieve." It's translated that way several times

in the NT. And if we take off the negating prefix “a,” and look at the root word *peitho*, it carries a much stronger sense of belief than obedience. Yes, again, it can be translated as “obey,” but much more often in the Greek speaking world it speaks to being convinced, brought to belief.

Now, there’s an important link here, and one that I’ve pointed out (perhaps too often) in these Divergences before. Belief comes before true obedience. When we see “disobedience” it is always, always because belief is inadequate to change behavior. So they’re linked, but our translators’ choice to go straight to disobedience harkens back to our propensity to put behavior before belief, which is backwards.

Okay. That wasn’t as much shorter as I’d thought it would be. Pardon me.

Gospel Text

There is something simple but deeply meaningful that recurs several times in our reading from John this week and elsewhere in the fourth Gospel and it ties into what I’ve said above. It’s the way that Jesus uses the word “keep” to refer to His commandments, or His words, or His Father’s words. We’re quick to substitute “obey” in our minds for “keep,” but that doesn’t convey the sense of the word at all.

Jesus says “keep” to say refer to those who hold His commandments close, who treasure them, treasure His words, His Father’s words. This is the real meaning of the verb *tereo*. Jesus isn’t saying that those who love Him will behave in a certain way, but that those who love Him will also, quite inevitably, love what He’s said and commanded, holding those things close, keeping them. And also, just as inevitably, they will discover that He and the Father have taken up dwelling with them, within them. It isn’t a reward for “keeping/obeying.” These are all things that are simultaneous parts of “loving” Jesus.

Well, I was kind of long-winded with the second reading. At least this one was, well, brief!