

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 23, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Exodus 32:1–14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”

But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (ESV)

Second Reading

Philippians 4:1–9

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 22:1–14

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”’ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a

wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Way back in chapter 20 of Exodus, God called Moses up onto the mountain and gave him the Ten Commandments, along with a great many others. Second among them was “You shall not make for yourselves any graven image.” Now here we are in chapter 32 and that’s exactly what Aaron and the people are doing. In my studies of the passage for this week I discovered two things that are probably important.

The first is that we may be tempted to think that the golden calves are images of some other God, a violation of the first Commandment. I know that’s how I grew up thinking. The calves and the revelry were of course some sort of fertility god and the wild bacchanale that they demand.

But in the ancient world, the bull (for that is what these likely were) is rarely associated with fertility. Rather, it is usually a symbol of strength, particularly military strength. Given that, this episode is better understood this way.

Moses was to the people the visible sign of God’s presence with them. Yes, there had been the pillar of cloud and fire, but here, at the base of Mount Horeb, Moses was the visible, tangible sign to the people that their God “went before them” in battle. (A phrase that is found often in the Hebrew Scriptures.) With Moses gone the people become fearful and seek some other visible representation of God’s presence as their undefeatable foreguard in warfare. They ask Aaron to make for them some other sign, and he concedes and makes two bulls to remind the people that God still “goes before” them. The celebration then is a celebration of military victory and a way of getting the people worked up to go into battle again, not some orgiastic celebration of fertility.

This remains a violation, but the people have not turned away from the God who led them out of Egypt. They have just reverted to the use of a visible symbol of His presence. I’ve done perhaps a poor job of summarizing the article that demonstrates all this, so [*HERE’S A LINK TO THE REAL ARTICLE.*](#)

The violation still remains a problem, though, especially for Aaron, whose priesthood is the emblem for all priesthood among the Israelites. This event even falls directly

between God's instructions for the building of the Tabernacle and the story of its being built. One wonders how the singular place of Aaron survived this misstep.

Another article I found helped me understand this better. Without going into the author's arguments, one conclusion stood out. In chapters 26-31 we have God's instructions for the Tabernacle, its building, furnishing, its priesthood. Then we have that disastrous event with the golden calves and the deaths of those who demanded the "other gods" from Aaron at the hands of the Levites (It is significant that while 3000 fell that day, not everyone who was a part of the celebration was killed.). This is then followed by the giving of new Tablets and the building of the Tabernacle (chapters 34 and 35). The pattern that becomes visible when we see it all this way is that of "institution," "fall," and "restoration." This is a pattern familiar to all of us, and it helps explain the survival of the Aaronic priesthood. It also gives us a reason for the rise of the Levites, as guardians of the Tabernacle.

Viewing all this from our side of the Cross, I also see Moses' pleading with God for a limit to His wrath as a type of Jesus, the One who intercedes on our behalf before the Father. So the motif of Institution, Fall, and Restoration is made even clearer, and a pattern that lies behind much of Scripture.

Second Reading

Over the last few weeks I've tried to fit our readings from Philippians into a larger context, that of Paul's real concern and purpose for the letter, unity in the face of division as exemplified by that between Euodia and Syntyche, and in the face of threats from without. (For a more detailed explanation of how I came to this, the Divergence for Proper 20.) Paul's final exhortations then are the point toward which he has been driving throughout the letter. "Stand firm." The duty of the citizen soldier, the citizen of the Kingdom. "Be united." For how can this citizenry stand if not as one? Rejoice, because co-suffering (represented earlier by Timothy and Epaphroditus) and co-rejoicing are marks of the "citizen," and they are called to be visible citizens of the Kingdom. And do all this in obedience to Paul from whom they received all these values, as imitators of Christ, who was obedient, even unto death.

Now that I've learned to read Philippians with Paul's purpose as its organizing principle, I see all these things as parts of a whole. Before, it seemed as though he were bouncing from one last thought to another. "I hope all of you will stand firm. Oh, and please help Euodia and Syntyche to get along better, okay. Before I forget, REJOICE! And here's a good list of things to meditate on, things I hope I left with you while was with you."

But now they all contribute to that larger whole. Yes, each of those verses is worthy of a sermon in itself, but Paul meant them each to be a part of something greater, something that only makes sense if we remember that all his letters are contingent, the result of a specific circumstance and his plan for addressing that circumstance.

Gospel Text

Our parable from Matthew this week tells the story of the King and the wedding banquet he prepared for his son. This parable of Jesus has some similarity to the one in Luke 14, wherein a “man” prepares a banquet (not a wedding banquet) to which no one will come. Some scholars have given a lot of thought and effort to finding an original parable from Jesus that might lie behind both of them (and also a third version that is in the Gospel of Thomas). Others have suggested that Luke’s is the closer to the version from “Q” and then gone on to identify what they believe to be Matthew’s redactional additions. I don’t find either of these approaches helpful or necessary. First, I believe Luke used Matthew to compose his gospel account. It seems far more likely to me that Luke trimmed the king and the wedding from Matthew’s version (along with the man cast out at the end) because of Luke’s emphasis on the poor and the average person rather than the wealthy and powerful. But I don’t find that necessary either. In the end, I think that we have two parables uttered by Jesus in very different settings with very different goals in mind. And yes, there are some signs of some Matthean tropes in the parable he recounts, but I don’t give them much weight.

One of the reasons that I think that we have two different stories told by Jesus is that our version for this week, Matthew’s wedding banquet, is likely a midrash on Zephaniah 1. I’ll share some of those verses with you here. (A translation from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that many first century Jews would have known.)

Zephaniah 1:7-10, 18

Be afraid before the presence of the Lord God; for the day of the Lord is near; for the **Lord has prepared his sacrifice**; he has sanctified **his invited ones**. And it will be in the day of the Lord’s **sacrifice**, that i will take vengeance on the rulers, and on the king’s house, and upon all that are **garbed in strange garments**. And I will openly take vengeance on all, at the gateways in that day, on those who fill the house of the Lord their God with impiety and deceit. And there shall be in that day, says the Lord, a loud cry from the gate of the **killers**, and howling from the second (quarter), and a great crashing from the hills...

18... And their silver and their gold will not at all be able to rescue them in the day of the Lord's **anger**; but the whole land will be consumed in the **fire** of his jealousy; for he will effect a speedy destruction upon all those inhabiting the land.

This insight comes to me from an article by Daniel C. Olson, and that translation of the Septuagint into English is his.

You'll note that in Olson's translation several words are highlighted, those that find parallels, either verbal or thematic, to our parable. The "sacrifice" has become a "feast". We have the themes of invitation and strange garments. There is the reference to "killers" and the Lord's "anger" and "fire."

There is a further possible parallel in that the passage from Zephaniah refers to vengeance... **on** the king's house. It does happen that the preposition *epi* and the accusative case for the following noun in the Greek means "in" rather than "on" in the Septuagint, though it's rare. This might also then give us another parallel to the king's actions when he comes in to the banquet.

While Olson sees this parable as one largely of Matthew's composition, I do not. I can easily see Jesus, in a time of grave conflict with Jewish authorities, recasting Zephaniah's prophecy as a parable for His day. Like the owner of the vineyard in the parable just before this one, the King is frustrated in His desire for "fruit," for persons to fill His banqueting hall. Jesus repurposes Zephaniah's "killers" as the ones who have killed the prophets who came before Him. It is the church who chooses to attend the banquet while the city is destroyed. Then we find the Matthean theme that I think I see added in. As in the parable of the wheat and the weeds and that of the fish, we see the Matthean concern for those with "strange garments." These would be those with wrong teachings who are nonetheless "inside" at the banquet. And Jesus' answer (and therefore Matthew's) to this is again, "Let the sorting wait until the Day of the Lord."

This parable has a couple of elements to it that might make us squirm. The "King," God, comes off as rather violent. But when we read this as midrash on Zephaniah's prophecy of the destruction of the entire kingdom we can see where it comes from. Further, Jesus has foreseen the destruction of Jerusalem that will come in 70 AD. The destruction of "their city" is nothing more than a consequence of the city's refusal to accept Him. And the casting out of the one with the wrong garment (wrong teachings) is tempered by the truth that this "outer darkness" is not one of eternal torment, but a place of purification by fire from which one emerges ready to enter where one had previously been unfit to go in.

My final take on this parable is that, as harsh as it seems, it comes across far less so when read against the much more devastating prophecy on which it was based.

Oh, and here's the link to Olson's article, if you're interested.

[Matthew 22:1-14 as Midrash](#)