

Divergence on the Lectionary - Christ the King, Year A

First Reading

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20-24 (Omitted verses in italics)

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?”

“Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken. (ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 1:15–23

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my

prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 25:31–46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Ezekiel was a prophet of the exile, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah's. Jeremiah was permitted to remain in Jerusalem when it rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and fell to him in 597, but the Babylonians took into exile the upper classes in Jerusalem. Ezekiel was a priest of the Temple and the nephew of the Zedekiah, the man appointed king in Judah when the reigning king, Jehoiachin was taken into exile, so Ezekiel was also taken. He received his call to prophesy in 593 BC and prophesied for at least the next 22 years.

The book of prophecy attributed to him is very neatly arranged into two halves. The first half contains only oracles against Jerusalem for its faithlessness, declaring God's intention to destroy it utterly. The second half is essentially a book of consolation for those in captivity in Babylon, though it begins with several chapters of oracles against the nations (which are of a sort with the consolations).

Ezekiel's prophecies contain some of the most colorful and exotic imagery and prophetic acts of any of the characters of the Bible, causing a number of scholars to speculate as to his mental state. I for one find no basis for this. His prophetic images and behavior are not sufficiently different from that of other prophets to conclude this and I know from my own experience that God will often use images like those given to Amos of the almond rod to convey a prophetic word. It needn't be a sign of epilepsy or schizophrenia.

The situation that prompts the prophecies of Ezekiel is the conflict between those taken into exile in Babylon and those left behind in Jerusalem. The Jews remaining in Jerusalem have assumed all the rights and property that once belonged to those who had been taken away. Further, there is considerable corruption and faithlessness filling the streets of the city of David. Ezekiel's prophecies functioned to continue to reassure those in Babylon that they would in fact return and also to condemn those who remained as those rejected by God.

Given that background, our reading from Ezekiel today takes on new and more specific meaning. God declares that He will judge between fat sheep and lean, rams and goats. The fat sheep who drive out the lean and weak are those who remain in Jerusalem and the lean are those who have been taken into exile. The rams (sheep) are those who are faithful to the Lord, even in exile, the goats are those who have fallen into all sorts of syncretistic worship in Jerusalem. Through Ezekiel God reassures the exiles that they will be gathered up and brought home, and that God will judge those who have been unfaithful in the city of David.

In our Gospel text for Christ the King, Jesus takes up this imagery that would have been very familiar to His hearers and reshapes it to His purposes, but we'll get to that in a bit. Now for the

Second Reading

I have had an ambivalent relationship to Ephesians for the last year or so due almost entirely to the "household code" in 5:21-6:9 and the way that it appears to reinforce hierarchies in the household that empower subjugation and abuse. At the same time, there are passages in the letter like the one we have for this week that so thrill my heart that I can hardly sit still to think or write about them. As a result I had come to the regrettable conclusion that as much as I loved this letter, it probably did not come from the hand of Paul.

Thanks be to God, before trying to write on the verses appointed for Christ the King, Year A, I sat down to reexamine my understandings of that household code and the conclusions I'd taken from it. Of course I had read before of the critiques of this passage from earlier feminist or anti-hierarchical points of view. Some had even suggested that there were elements of the code that undermined the very hierarchies they appeared to support, but none had done so forcefully enough to convince me that these verses could have come from Paul, for whom in Christ there is "no male and female." (Gal. 3:28)

Thanks to Elna Mouton and her article in *Neotestamentica* (here's a [LINK](#)) I have finally been able to divorce the household code from its history of male-dominant reception and interpretation and give to the subversive elements of these verses the weight they're due. Whether one chooses to attribute this letter to Paul (as I now can and do) or to a deutero-Pauline source, the household code of chapters 5 and 6 no longer stand in stark contrast to the majesty of the rest of the letter.

Rather than deal with the later section of the letter here, I'll save that for the next year of the Lectionary. Ephesians is read on many Sundays in Year B and I'll write an introduction to the whole letter then. Meanwhile, if you're curious as to what finally broke through my hard head, I ask you to read the article I linked above, because I really, really want to get to writing about our verses for this week.

I once heard Bill Johnson preach a 45 minute sermon on these opening verses from Ephesians that set my heart on fire. In the way that the hearts of Clopas and his friend "burned" after Jesus had opened the Scriptures to them on the road to Emmaus, these verses kindled a flame inside me with Bill's help. I went on to preach Bill's sermon to my own congregation (giving him due credit) but I broke it into four pieces because, well, you can't get away with preaching for 45 minutes in an Episcopal church.

Neither can I get myself to try to recreate Bill's sermon here. I wish I could find a link to it somewhere, though. Bill is a controversial figure, especially among evangelical Christians. I don't agree with everything he says or does, but his insights, his vision are captivating and they have the power and potential to revitalize huge segments of the Church. So I try to do as my mother in God Sue used to say, "enjoy the fish, just don't choke on the bones."

So here I'll just try to describe some of the images I received from Bill in that sermon and then ask you to meditate on them to see where they might spark your own wildfire.

...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you...

First and foremost, Bill would like us all to learn to live what He called an "ascended life." We've talked about that in other Divergences when we consider what it means to live as one for whom the Kingdom is already present. We are in Christ, and in the Kingdom, and now. This is not a future hope, but a belief in something that is present, but not seen. This is the hope to which we are called.

...what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...

Stop and meditate on this reality for a moment. His glorious inheritance is you. That's right. You, the glorious object of His desire. Glorious. That's you, that's us. Just think on that for a while.

...and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead...

That is, the very same power that raised Jesus from the dead is "toward" you and me. It is focused on us. Can there be any doubt that you and I can change the world if the power that raised Jesus from the dead is part of our hope, is presently focused on us?

...and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come...

Jesus has been seated above all rule and authority and power and dominion. And we are in Him. So, as Bill once said, “Even if we’re down in His feet, we’re still above everything, too.” This is part of what Bill means about living an ascended life. We live from a place of victory, not for it or toward it. We don’t try to bring victory about, we try to manifest what already is.

It’s a radical change of mindset, one that Graham Cooke also talks about when he teaches concerning living from the future to the present, rather than from the past. I think that this is part of what Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians where he says, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Corinthians 3:18) The more time we spend looking at ourselves as Jesus sees us, already redeemed and perfected, the more we begin to resemble that person.

I think you can see how this could all stretch into a whole sermon series. I hope that you’ll take a moment to gaze into these startling truths and let them help you draw your own future into the here and now.

Gospel Text

I wrote in the Divergence on Proper 27 that I would group this parable of the sheep and the goats with those parables in Matthew that appear to be concerned with who will be fit to enter the Kingdom at Jesus’ return. Though it shares a certain eschatological harshness with the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, (it seems to differentiate between two easily identifiable groups and include one group while excluding the other.) I would like to suggest that it bears greater relationship to the parables of the wheat and the weeds or the fish in the nets. This is because at the time that Jesus used the images of sheep and goats there wasn’t the easy association of one with “good” and the other “bad” that we have today. Quite the contrary.

While we tend to think that goats were inherently bad, or at least less good, it is because we have centuries of Christian interpretation through which we view the parable. We also have a long history of association between goats and the devil that was and is common to the eastern Mediterranean but quite foreign to the semitic peoples of Jesus’ day. In the eastern Mediterranean goats are herded separately from sheep and treated as nearly worthless. In the hills of Judah they were all herded together and one valued much the same as another. So this parable bears greater relationship to the parables wherein differentiating between the Christians who “got it right” and those who didn’t was left until the return of Christ. (The early emphasis seems to point beyond those known to Matthew and his congregation, though. *Ethnon*, translated “nations” is also the word for “Gentiles.” Could it speak to Gentile believers?)

While the parable gives us information about who will be allowed to enter that the other parables lack, the people who are actual characters in the story don't know this information and so they approach the Last Day as ignorantly as do the fish or the wheat and tares.

Given this, I tend to think that this parable speaks to the individual, not the community, in a way that helps to interpret the other parables. That is, only the individual really knows if s/he has cared in any way for one of "the least of these, my siblings." Interestingly, Jesus has earlier in Matthew excluded those who have done anything in order to be seen. "They have received their reward." (Matthew 6) So this parable combines with the earlier ones and Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount to suggest that only those who have cared for the poor *in secret* are those named as the sheep. And those would be indistinguishable to anyone else, like the wheat and the good fish.

As much as this sounds like a simple morality tale, I don't think Jesus meant it like that. It might have been understood that way by many, even by Matthew, but to read it this way makes a mockery of the grace and mercy purchased at the Cross. If we can purchase our passage into the Kingdom by acts of care and generosity toward the prisoner, the sick, the poor, then what need is there of Jesus' sacrifice?

Instead of reading this parable as a simple if/then statement (which is no parable at all) I think that the deeper meaning is that those who know Jesus in the here and now, know His love and mercy, will act similarly toward those in need. When the Day of Judgement comes, they will encounter the one they expect and will enter in, relying on His mercy, not their actions. Those who don't know Him will act in their own self interest, and when He arrives, they'll expect a "savior" who is essentially like themselves and who judges them as harshly as they judge others (which would be why they'd refuse to help those who "deserved it"). Facing that judge will definitely be an occasion for weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Of course, this isn't who the King really is or will be, and they'll learn that, so the sobbing and the TMJ problems will only be temporary, perhaps momentary. But I think it may feel like an eternity.

Just don't presume to know who's who. The job of differentiating has never been ours.