

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

### First Reading

Jonah 3:1–5, 10

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. (ESV)

### Second Reading

1 Corinthians 7:29–31

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (ESV)

### Gospel Text

Mark 1:14–20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them,

and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

Most of us know the story of Jonah and the whale, or the “great fish” as it is better translated. Read alone, the book of Jonah seems largely focused on the issue of a prophet’s call and his disobedience, his correction and his concession. In that reading, our lesson from Jonah today feels a bit anticlimactic. All the interesting parts of the story have already transpired. Jonah fled on a ship, God caused a storm, Jonah was thrown off the ship to save the other sailors and Jonah was swallowed (rescued?) by the great fish. After all that adventure, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh again and this time he goes. And wonder of wonders, everybody repents. It could have been a much shorter book if he’d just acceded in the beginning. This portion we have for 3 Epiphany might have seemed like the climax rather than the denouement.

But as I was reading this week about Jonah I discovered something I think I probably should have learned in seminary, but missed. Jonah is one of the books counted among “The Twelve.” That’s the collection of the twelve “lesser prophets” (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) that circulated as one book before its incorporation into the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jonah stands apart from the rest of the collection because instead of being composed largely or entirely of oracles from God, it is almost exclusively narrative in nature. The story is the point, not the prophetic utterances.

What I learned this week that was even more important is that The Twelve is not merely a collection of books from small prophets. It is the work of a composer/editor. These books were arranged and edited so as to emphasize a theme that is threaded throughout them, a theme first announced in Hosea 3:4-5, that a united Israel (North *and* South) would one day return under a Davidic king. Under this rule, all nations would come to Israel and become a part of the new kingdom, obedient to God. Edom serves as the symbol for “the nations” in Amos, Nineveh does in Jonah. It was fascinating to learn how the endings of the various books were written by the editor so as to link them to the book that followed, and to discover a theme that binds them all together.

In that light, our reading from Jonah this week is not the winding down of a preceding story that was far more interesting. To the composer of The Twelve, this was the climax. Nineveh, standing in for every nation at the time of the final ascendance of Israel, repents and turns to the Lord and is forgiven and accepted. I am reminded of the vision

of John in Revelation 7, “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” This multitude sounds like the vision of the person who assembled the book of The Twelve to me.

## Second Reading

We will be reading a good deal from 1 Corinthians in the weeks to come in Year B, so I’ve tried to put together a brief introduction to the letter as a whole to give all those lections some context.

### A Brief Introduction to Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

1 Corinthians wasn’t Paul’s first letter to Corinth. It is the first of which we have any copy. In the letter itself he makes reference to an earlier letter. (5:9) First or no, it is reasonable to think, though, that this letter dates from around 55 to 56 C.E.

The members of the Corinthian congregation to which he wrote would probably have been largely members of the artisan class who made things like the tents and awnings Paul made to provide for himself. These people did not enjoy what we know today as a middle-class existence. They knew no real financial security and lived day-to-day. There are clues, however, that suggest some among the Corinthians held greater status. There is a reference to an Erastus in Romans 16 that is likely the same Erastus who paid for the paving of a communal square in Corinth in return for his being elevated to a public office. People who were in this way socially and financially secure constituted a very small fraction of the population, and so likely a small portion of the congregation.

The Corinthian congregation included many Gentile converts. While Paul makes no real mention of Jewish converts in his letter, the fact that he makes so many references and allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures suggests to me that there were enough Jewish believers or Gentile “God-fearers” (Gentile hangers-on to the synagogue) among them to take their knowledge of those texts for granted. No doubt Paul had taught them from the Hebrew Scriptures, but his allusions suggest to me a greater familiarity. While Corinth was largely Gentile, it is quite possible that some Diaspora Jews had settled there, especially after Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 19.

The Corinthian congregation existed in a very powerful city that had only been refounded by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. It dominated trade both north/south and east/west along the isthmus on which it was centrally located. This gave rise to some social mobility that wasn't as present in other cities of the empire, as there were no families with long social standing. There was an elite class, and those of lesser standing had at least some reason to hope they might join it. While most of the congregation weren't even what we'd call middle class, let alone students of rhetoric or philosophy, many of them would have heard oratorical competitions and others expounding on the philosophers. This is likely the reason that Paul so clearly contrasts himself with those who speak "words of wisdom." Rather, he relies on demonstrations of power and the Holy Spirit.

What appears to be the primary reason for Paul's letter is what one scholar has called their "enthusiasm." That is, they are so impressed with their own spiritual gifts that they have lost track of their oneness in Christ and their rootedness in their Jewish heritage. This has resulted in factionalism and a hands-off approach to a variety of inconsiderate and immoral acts. It would be easy to read the letter as one that is primarily concerned with "rule breaking" but this would miss Paul's point entirely. Yes, Paul writes at length about things like sexual morality and food offered to idols and the way that they seek advantage among themselves. But I don't think his primary focus is the behaviors. It is the spiritual illness that lies beneath them all.

Imagine a doctor coming into the exam room to explain the results of all your tests. He may show you your blood lipid profile or your x-ray, but those indicators are not the disease. You may, (like me) simply process lipids badly or you may have an inherited form of cancer. Her purpose in pointing them out and telling you that these things need fixing is not her goal. Getting you on board with a treatment plan is. The illness that Paul is diagnosing is this reality: What the Corinthians place their pride in is not the Holy Spirit he preached. His treatment plan would have been to seek a Spirit whose manifestation is love for and unity with one another.

As we work our way through 1 Corinthians in Year B, I'll try to refer back to the social setting and fundamental purposes of the letter in the Divergences.

And now, on to our reading for this week.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians this week falls at the end of chapter 7, most of which is concerned with marriage. It connects briefly with the preceding chapter when Paul says, "let those who have wives live as though they had none," but this is a weak connection at best. What these verses do is set that preceding discussion, and a lot of other paraenesis

in 1 Corinthians in Paul's apocalyptic context. In the Thessalonian letters, Paul's emphasis is on Jesus' imminent Second Coming. By the time he writes Romans he is far more concerned with life in an ongoing Christian community. Here in Corinthians he seems to me to be in transition. There are elements of 1 Corinthians that sound like Thessalonians, but there is a great deal that suggests a longer view than the End of Days in a near future.

Over time, Paul's apocalyptic theology changes from the anticipation of a near-future event to an understanding of a revelation (the meaning of apocalypse) that has already broken in and changed everything. Here in Corinthians he wrestles with a congregation that has taken the already-present Kingdom several steps too far, casting off any restraint as a result. Our verses from the letter for this week enjoin the Corinthians to continue to live with expectation, as though the "time" in which they find themselves is not the end time at all, but one that is still passing away. For this reason, morality still matters, being as unattached as possible matters.

### Gospel Text

Last week, the theme of Epiphany, the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles, was expressed through John's telling of the story of the calling of Philip and Nathanael. That doesn't feel very "Epiphany-ish" to me, but perhaps it does when we consider that Philip is among the first disciples to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, when he meets, teaches, and baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. (Acts 8)

This week we have the call of Simon Peter and Andrew. I don't see any evidence in Scripture of Andrew preaching to the Gentiles, but certainly Peter does. It is he who preaches the Gospel to the Roman Centurion and then baptizes his whole family. (Acts 10)

I am not certain that's why these two Gospel texts were chosen as part of our lections for the season of Epiphany, but at least this reason makes some sense of it for me.

What I'd like to draw attention to, if it you haven't already noticed, is that we are already encountering Mark's favorite word, "immediately," *euthus* in Greek. He uses the word 41 times in his short Gospel, and 12 in the first chapter alone! Mark's Gospel seems to rush breathlessly from its beginning to its end. This is just one of the reasons that I'm convinced that Mark intended for his Gospel to be read aloud, all at once. Some of you have no doubt heard of or seen single persons who have memorized the entire text of Mark and perform it as a sort of one act play. I think that's exactly what Mark had in mind. There are words and phrases that link the first half of the Gospel to the same

words and phrases in the second half. All of that will be lost if it isn't read so that the hearer remembers the first words when they come to the last.

This isn't to say that Mark wasn't also used for study and teaching. I'm sure it was, especially for those preparing for baptism. But at some point, these same catechumens would have heard the Gospel in its whole, rushing like a heavy wind from John's proclamation of Jesus to the one of the young man in the tomb.

Scholars often comment on Mark's Greek, how it is much poorer than that of Matthew or Luke. But Mark wasn't writing modern Torah as Matthew was, nor was he writing for a literate Greek speaking audience (who actually read novels for pleasure) as Luke was. He was writing drama, and he used the language of the people and paced his Gospel like one of those one act *verismo* operas like *Cavalleria Rusticana* or *Il Tabarro*.

Hang on as we jump into Mark and Year B. It'll be a wild ride.