

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B

First Reading

Jeremiah 31:31–34

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 5:5–10

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;

as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 12:20–33

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our reading today from Jeremiah comes from that short section in the latter half of the book called the “Book of Consolation,” chapters 30 and 31. These chapters offer hope to a people in exile, and our reading today fits in neatly. In it God offers a “new” covenant to the people to replace the one that they’ve broken, the one that has landed them in exile.

Christians have long accepted with little critical thought that this “new covenant” was the one that Jesus speaks of at the Last Supper, the New Covenant in His blood. And yet that isn’t at all clear. Scholarly opinion has been somewhat divided on the nature of the new covenant Jeremiah had in mind, and I haven’t been able to discern a real consensus on it in my searching. The question seems to be whether or not Jeremiah intended a covenant that abrogated the old one, or just a “renewed” covenant.

What seems to set the new covenant apart from the old one is not any new law, any new precepts, but that this one will be “written on the heart.” It seems to suggest the end of a written law that is replaced by one that is written internally. But this impression relies almost entirely on our misunderstanding of the way that scribal education worked in that culture. “Written on the heart” does not mean known to the exclusion of a written

source, but rather the *memorization* of a written source. Scribal education was always about writing on the heart, memorization. But the written text was always preserved as a means to that end and a check against error.

God's declaration that there will be a new covenant that They write upon the heart is not a substitution of something new for the written covenant. What sets it apart is not that it is written on the heart, but Who does the writing. This "new covenant" is one in which God replaces the scribe. It isn't at all clear that Jeremiah intends us that the new covenant is any different than the old one, only that it our teacher will be God not the scribes. It isn't the law that has failed for Jeremiah, the failure lies with the teachers.

Can we still connect this new covenant of Jeremiah's with the one that Jesus speaks of at the Last Supper? I think that we can. At least I think I can. The covenant that Jesus offers is not one that abrogates the covenant God has always had with Their children. Instead, it is one that makes clear the "heart" of that covenant. And this "renewed" covenant is one that is made clear by Jesus' death, His sacrifice, His blood. And the truth of this covenant is revealed by the "Counselor," the Holy Spirit, who will "lead us into all truth." God does become the teacher, the revealer of truth.

This is a different way of understanding the (re)new(ed) covenant under which I live than I have ever had before. There is a greater sense of continuity than I have had in the past. Perhaps you all have had that understanding all along, but it's a pretty big shift for me. I'm not sure I've explained it as clearly as I would have liked, but I'm still letting it settle out in my head.

Second Reading

I have to be honest here. I struggle with this passage. "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek."

First, what does the author of Hebrews mean when he says Jesus "learned obedience?" Then, "He *became* the source of eternal salvation?" Wasn't He always? "To all who obey Him?"

I've done a good deal of searching for others' opinions on some of these questions, even tried wading through a paper on Thomas Aquinas' views on this passage, in French. (My seventh and eighth grade French teacher would be so proud!) But no one really spoke to my concerns. So what I have to offer is just what I've been able to come up with on my own.

Jesus “learned obedience.”

Here the author of Hebrews writes of Jesus’ cries in the Garden of Gethsemane and His reverent submission, “Not my will, but thine be done.” But does the author mean that Jesus did not know anything of obedience prior to that time? I don’t think so. Instead, I think what he means is that in this moment Jesus *experienced* obedience in a way He never had before, *experienced* the anguish our humanity creates in us in moments of great distress, He *learned* more of what our own obedience, our own surrender will cost us.

In the same way, His obedience did not make Him something He was not, the source of eternal salvation, but rather this obedience, this costly obedience bridged a gap between Him and us in way that could not have existed had He not gone through what we go through.

So He became that source for those of us who “obey” Him, that is, who entrust ourselves to Him. That word, “obey” is a sort of intensive version of the verb to “listen” or “hear.” *Hupakuo* is a combination of the prefix that looks like our “hyper” and the world for “listen,” *akuo*. So “obey” means to “hyper-listen,” in a sense. And what is it that His obedience asks that we “hyper-listen” to?

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”

“I go to prepare a place for you.”

“I will never abandon nor forsake you.”

Those who obey Jesus, who place their trust in what He has said, perceive that His cries and His suffering have bridged any gap between His experience, His life, and ours. As He was enabled to obey, to trust in His Father’s will for Him and for us, so also we will be enabled.

Honestly, that’s the best I can do with this passage. I hope it makes some sense to you.

Gospel Text

“Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”

How does the author of the Fourth Gospel understand the working, the purpose of the Passion of Jesus? While some commentators on John argue that the imagery of the

Lamb who takes away the sin of the world is the primary image, others go so far as to say that, “In John, Jesus' death has no preeminent importance for salvation.” (Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*) Still others suggest that Jesus' glorification, His being “lifted up” from the earth are references to His Ascension, not His Crucifixion, that His death on the Cross is little more than a step on that journey back to the Father. In some of these same authors the dualisms of John, light/dark, good/evil, the division of humanity into two camps, according to their reaction to the “light,” are all viewed not as elements of the saving work of Christ, but as the results of gnostic or Platonic influences.

I discovered this week, in my studies of this passage, a convincing article by Judith Kovacs that casts a very different light on the work of the Cross in John and the relationship of the Fourth Gospel to apocalyptic literature, much of it from the Second Temple period and that between the Old and New Testaments. These texts that preceded John often make reference to two themes we find in our reading for this week, a cosmic combat between forces of good and evil and a “judgment” of the forces of darkness.

This cosmic conflict which results in the “casting out” and judgment of the “ruler of this world” is stated most clearly in our text for 5 Lent, but it is reflected in even the earliest verses of the Gospel. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5, ESV) What strikes me though, is that the apocalyptic battles which form the background for John's cosmic understanding of the Cross are battles in which the divine warrior comes in strength and military might and emerges victorious through that strength.

In John, Jesus is victorious through His death, not through conquest. It is this awkward juxtaposition that I think causes one commentator to say,

“Apart from a few remarks that point ahead to it, the passion comes into view in John only at the very end. One is tempted to regard it as being a mere postscript which had to be included because John could not ignore this tradition nor yet could he fit it organically into his work. His solution was to press the features of Christ's victory upon the passion” (Kasemann, *The Testament of Jesus*)

For Kasemann and some others the death of Jesus is not central to the glorification of Jesus, but an inconvenience. But the defeat of darkness through the death of the champion rather than through conquest, that is to me exactly the point. This is what sets not just John but all of the Gospels apart. It is the Fourth Gospel, though, that expresses this most clearly.

As many of the regular readers of the Divergences will know, I often view the Scriptures through the lens of mimetic theory, the system of insights first offered by Rene Girard. What I have learned from Girard and some of his students makes the death of Jesus as victory, as glorification central to the understanding of the Gospel of John (and all the Gospels to some degree) not an embarrassment.

Girard understands human society as something built on the death of a “scapegoat.” Our desires which are of necessity imitative or “mimetic” lead to conflict over commonly desired “goods” and these conflicts or “rivalries” escalate in human social groupings until they threaten the group’s very existence. It is at this point that the group will select an innocent member and sacrifice them, thus expending all the rivalrous rage and bringing peace. This peace, this death, then becomes the foundation of human culture. Girard has demonstrated how this process exhibits itself in every conceivable culture, again and again. Of course it is much more involved than this thumbnail, but the point is this: the culture that emerges from the scapegoat’s death is built upon three pillars, religion, prohibition, and myth. Religion is the systematic repetition of the salvific sacrifice - it worked once, keep doing it. Prohibition is the attempt to fence in the rivalry that leads to social breakdown, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s property.” Myth is the masking of the death of the scapegoat to free the society from guilt over their death.

Jesus’ death casts out the ruler of this world by crushing two of those three pillars. He dies as the innocent scapegoat, but refuses to take on the mantle of the guilty one whose death is deserved. The Gospels are unique in human history because they all refused to participate in “myth making,” in the declaration of the guilt of the scapegoat. By unmasking the victimization process Jesus brings it “into the light” and judges it, this gift from the pits of hell. Once the innocence of our victims is exposed the power of “religion” the ritualization of our sacrifices is broken. It becomes less and less effective at relieving our guilt and venting our mimetic rage, and the society built on it breaks down. The broken “world” is judged, and the Cross is the cudgel that smashes the system built on the death of the scapegoat to pieces.

I am tempted to go on at length about the decay of human society we see happening about us today and the dissolution of the scapegoat mechanism that I see at its root, but that’s another essay for another day.