

Divergence on the Lectionary - The Feast of Pentecost, Year B

First Reading

Acts 2:1–21

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.
And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' (ESV)

Or,

Ezekiel 37:1–14

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD." (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 8:22–27

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (ESV)

Or,

Acts 2:1-21 (see above)

Gospel Text

John 15:26–27, 16:4b-15 (omitted verses in italics)

“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.

“I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own

authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading (Acts reading)

In many churches on this Sunday, there will be celebrations that look like a birthday party. I've even heard of churches that bring out a birthday cake for Pentecost Sunday. To these folks, Pentecost marks the "birth of the Church," and is to be celebrated as such. It's certainly understandable. After a brief affirmation of belief in the Holy Spirit, both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed go directly to belief in the "holy catholic Church." As if they were cause and effect. And to some degree it must be true. Surely there would be no Church apart from the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

But I am saddened that on the feast day that is devoted to the Holy Spirit we sometimes find ourselves celebrating ourselves, the Church. For that is what we are, aren't we? The Church? What other feast day is given to the celebration of the Third Person of the Trinity? I can't think of one. We, the church, in spite of all our flaws, are surely one of God's great miracles, but doesn't that miracle pale in the face of God bestowing Himself so lavishly on us in the Person of the Holy Spirit?

Throughout God's history with humankind, the Bible records the anointing of certain individuals with the Holy Spirit for certain purposes of leadership. But at the Pentecost God comes to dwell within a whole people. Prior to this moment, Holy Spirit lies like a mantle on the shoulders of the anointed. From this time forth Holy Spirit rises up from within us all like a well from which the whole world may drink. Every follower of Jesus is "pentecostal." We are all heirs of the promise quoted by Peter in our reading the one God made through Joel.

“And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.” (Joel 2:28–29, ESV)

And doesn't the world around us need a dream into which we can all be drawn? Doesn't it need a vision that lifts all our eyes? Doesn't it need in-Spiration to preach real Good News? Doesn't your heart cry out for someone to step up and give life and voice to that Gospel, that vision, that dream?

You are the one you've been crying out for. The same Holy Spirit that empowered Jesus to do all the things that He did is your gift from God. If you are reluctant, that is probably a sign that you're most qualified to take up the task. Your humility will be your safeguard. If you are afraid, it says that you recognize the enormity of the task entrusted to you, and its cost. But the gift given you for the work dwarfs the task, makes the cost laughable.

Pentecost is the day that God says to you and me, "My Son has done His part. Now I am coming to indwell you so that you can live into the call that My children have had since their first moments in the Garden. Bring My peace, My kingdom to reign over chaos and pain. It is my joy to entrust this work to you. Now go in My power, My joy, My strength. Go and love the world as I have loved it."

Or,

(Ezekiel Reading)

Back on the week of Christ the King (Year A) I wrote a brief introduction to the situation in which Ezekiel prophesied. Here's a link to that introduction if you'd like to read it. This week I'll just give the bare bones. (Pun almost intended.) Ezekiel was a prophet of the Babylonian exile. He was primarily concerned with two things. First was the faithlessness of the people of Judah that had brought such harsh punishment upon them. The first half of the book of Ezekiel deals with this. The second thing was despair, despair that was leading into apathy.

The conditions of exile in Babylon weren't nearly as bad as the prophets had predicted they would be. In fact, the Jews living in Babylon were discovering that it wasn't difficult to establish themselves, to make a new home. Combine this with despair that they might ever return home, ever be a people again in their own right, and Ezekiel rightly fears that they may just give up hope.

This is the setting into which God breathes this prophecy into Their people through the prophet. This remarkable image of the valley of dry bones speaks both judgment and hope. The people have become as lifeless as dry bones, scattered on the field of battle. But this is no reason for hopelessness, for God will bring back to life that which has accommodated itself to despair.

The way that Ezekiel plays on the word *ruach*, the word for spirit, breath, evokes the image of God, breathing life into the dust that became Adam (though Genesis uses *nismal* for “breath”, it is the Spirit of God (*ruach*) that moves over the waters to create). It also evokes the eradication of the “breath” (*ruach*) of life in the Great Flood of Genesis 6. The breath that God has taken, God will restore. God speaks a word through the prophet and bones are joined, sinew and skin return. Finally God speaks *breath* into the people, the four winds (*ruach*) come and breath enters the people and they rise, prepared to re-enter the land of Israel.

What I’d never fully understood before is the way that this prophetic vision prophesies itself. That is, this word of the valley of dry bones is itself the prophecy spoken over the people that brings bones together, makes arms strong, and reinvigorates the people. This is God, speaking through the prophet, reassembling God’s people, reanimating them. This isn’t Ezekiel saying, “This is what God is going to do,” this is God, *doing it*. Small wonder we read this text with awe even unto this day. These words are imbued with the Spirit in a way that few others in the Bible can match.

They speak to us, I think, in direct proportion to the way in which we are able to accept the judgment of “dry bones.” Not condemnation, but judgment, that is, a right discernment of who and what we are right now. How much do we despair of ever bringing into being the Kingdom that God has promised? How much have we accommodated ourselves to the situation in which we find ourselves? The promise of Ezekiel and of Pentecost is that God will take that which has grown dry and breathe new life into it, into us. But I think it’s the vision of that greater thing that draws us into the new life. The prophetic vision dares us to dream again, dream immeasurably bigger with Ezekiel.

Second Reading (Romans Reading)

The text as I’ve copied it from the ESV for this week actually has a couple of translational improvements on the NRSV that most of us will hear on Sunday morning. The first is that it translates the words for “groaning” (*sustenazei, stenazomen, stenagmois*) the same way all three times so that we hear Paul’s intended repetitions. The NRSV makes the unfortunate mistake of calling it “sighs” in the third instance.

The second is that the ESV translates it “... we do not know *what to pray for* as we ought,” where the NRSV has, “we do not know *how to pray* as we ought.”

There is a third translational improvement on both the ESV and the NRSV that could be made. It's a simple thing, but in verse 27, it would probably be more accurate *not* to capitalize the first occurrence of "spirit", and to use "mind" rather than "will" of God, so that it would read, "And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the mind of God." This reads better this way because the "Spirit" of God knows the "spirit" of humankind, that is what it is secretly set on, better than we do, and helps us (verse 26) because it (Spirit) knows also the mind of God. (Neither *mind* nor *will* of God occur in the Greek original at the end of v. 27, so that it just makes better sense to repeat mind.)

Having noted all that, the meaning of this passage (for me, at least) becomes a little clearer.

All of creation groans "in childbirth," in the (painful) anticipation of the revelation of the "revealing of the sons (and daughters of course) of God." (verse 19, not in our reading for this week) There is a groaning that comes with bringing forth that which is not yet seen, and which is echoed in us when we do not know what to pray for. As we try to bring forth that which we have not yet seen, what we don't even know to pray for, the Spirit intercedes on our behalf with groans like those of childbirth. It's important for me to point out that the Spirit isn't interceding "for us" as in praying for us the way we pray for someone else, They (Spirit) do our praying "for us" because we can't. Those words, "for us" or as I've translated it "on our behalf" don't occur in the Greek either.

These "groans" that are too deep for words I have been led to understand to be the source of at least some "tongues" or glossolalia. It certainly works that way in me. When I find myself moved to give praise that escapes my own language, I find myself praying with non-words, tongues. When I am trying to pray, intercede, for others, but I don't really know what to pray, tongues emerge. (for instance, during the Prayers of the People) I'm pretty private about that. I don't pray that way audibly, but this non-verbal prayer bubbles up in me in these and other moments.

Now, how does this passage fit into Paul's larger purpose in the letter, keeping in mind that Paul wrote for a specific reason. I have written in other Divergences about my belief that the primary issue that occasioned this letter was conflict in Rome between Gentile Christians and the Jewish hosts in whose synagogues they worshiped. (I wrote more about my understanding in the Divergence for 1 Lent, Year C, for that, [CLICK HERE](#) so I can save some space.)

Somehow, our reading for this week has to be connected to that larger purpose. Here is how I see it.

Paul is speaking to his Gentile church that does not know what they ought to pray for. Small wonder, as they have not grown up in the synagogue, and do not know the Scriptures. They are, however, empowered by the Spirit of God to pray with deep groanings that express the mind of God. This is the final encouragement from Paul for these Gentile converts before he launches into his defense of his “brothers,” his “kinsmen of the flesh.” (chapter 9) I personally find it likely that the reason this emphasis on the Christians’ life in the Spirit comes last is because he knows the way that Holy Spirit breaks down barriers, seeing beyond labels like Jew and Gentile, seeing what is not yet visible.

Reading these verses in the context of the Roman situation helps me to see that some of what Paul was describing was a groaning for unity between slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female for which Creation also groans, and for which the Spirit intercedes for us when we don’t know what to pray for.

Or,

(Acts Reading, see above)

Gospel Text

“And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.”

As part of Jesus’ farewell discourse(s), He comforts His disciples with the promise of the “Helper,” the *parakletos*, the Paraclete. In the NRSV that many of us will heard read on Pentecost Sunday, it’s translated the “Advocate.” Many of you know that this is a legal term for someone who represents you, helps you, advocates for you in court.

So it’s not too surprising that our translators chose another legalistic term to translate *elenxo*, that is, as “convict” in this somewhat perplexing verse. But this is not the only way to translate that verb, and it certainly isn’t the way I’d translate it. While technically not inaccurate, “convict,” at least in modern usage, carries connotations that don’t fit. It makes no sense to say that the Advocate will “convict” the world concerning righteousness, that is about something for which there is nothing to condemn. Instead, I prefer “reveal” as my translational choice.

Given that different choice, I’d paraphrase verses 8-10 this way.

“And when he comes, He will reveal the world about sin and righteousness and judgment. He will reveal sin, in that they did not believe in me. He will reveal righteousness because I will no longer be here to show God’s righteousness after I go to the Father. He will reveal judgment because my going to the Father will reveal God’s judgment of the ruler of this world.”

Jesus equates sin with not believing in Him because this is the root of sin, to fail to believe in the heart of God revealed in Jesus. Every single thing we do that is sinful springs from our failure to put our trust in that Goodness.

The Advocate will reveal righteousness to every heart in a way that Jesus cannot. He can only reveal righteousness to the few who come to know Him. The Spirit can reveal God’s righteousness to every heart.

The events that are immediately to follow, Jesus’ Passion and Crucifixion reveal the evil of the “ruler of this world.” I’m tempted to go off on a Girardian rabbit trail here, but I’ll refrain.

There is a real difference for me between “convict” and “condemn,” but they feel all too similar in modern usage. If we understood how close “convict” and “reveal” are in biblical usage, I probably wouldn’t fuss so much over this translation, but we don’t (as a rule) and so I do.

As an aside, I also included the omitted verses in italics for our study text. In recent weeks we have dealt with a good bit of John and 1 John in the Divergences. (especially 5 and 6 Easter) It feels to me like a later insertion by John in response to those who have put the Johannine community “out of the synagogue,” those who “hate their brother and sister,” those who deny that the Christ is Jesus. The passage for this week reads well, even better, without those italicized verses. But their insertion speaks to the importance of the division and condemnation that John and his community are experiencing and that we’ve been studying lately.