

Divergence on the Lectionary - Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year B

First Reading

Acts 1:15–17, 21-26

In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry...

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 John 5:9–13

If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 17:6–19

“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that

everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our reading from Acts this week tells the story of the selection of Matthias, the Apostle chosen to take the place of Judas. It was necessary for there to be twelve.

Reading this week about the process of “casting lots” I learned a good deal about what that phrase really meant in the first century Jewish community, and how it was understood very differently in Luke’s Gentile world.

By the time of Jesus, the use of Urim and Thummim, the “lots” cast to indicate God’s will for various decisions, had nearly ceased. They were still used to randomize certain functions, such as the rota for service in the Temple, but they were *not* used for any decision of importance.

However, the language of “lots” was still used metaphorically. “The lot comes forth” was a phrase used to signify a decision that had been (prayerfully) made by a group of persons. So, in the Manual of Discipline from Qumran we read, “If, according to the priests and the multitude of the men of the covenant, the lot comes forth (the decision is made) that he should be admitted to the community....”

However, in the Greco-Roman world, the use of the lot continued and even expanded. Though it was not viewed as an expression of some divine will, it was used as a check on

ambition. So positions of responsibility and power were often chosen by lot rather than by the influence of the persons involved.

What this suggested to one author I read (and something that seems reasonable to me) is that the story of the selection of Matthias came to Luke containing the Jewish understanding of the lot “coming forth” for Matthias, but this referred to a prayerful discernment of God’s will by the eleven, not the casting of physical lots.

Luke may or may not have known that this was a metaphorical reference, that “the lot came forth for Matthias,” but he was familiar with the Greco-Roman method of choosing people for responsible positions. He would have expressed it as the use of physical lots (he clearly does) for either of two reasons. 1) It was what he knew, or 2) (and I find this most likely) he wanted to make it clear to his Gentile audience that Matthias was *God’s choice* for the position.

I remember a time when I attended a diocesan workshop on some kind of justice issue. We were given the well-worn exercise where each table was given a life-boat full of twelve different people, housewives, business men, doctors, teachers, thieves, drug addicts, all sorts. There was only enough room in the boat for eleven. We had to choose who to kick out of the boat. I talked my table into casting lots. It really made our facilitators angry. (I can be a real pain.) Having studied this text more carefully now, I might have to repent of that choice!

Second Reading

“Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”

In recent weeks we have had several readings from 1 John. I’ve discussed the schism that has divided the Johannine believers and some of the ways we can identify the different teachings and behaviors that marked those who “went out” from John’s community. As we come to the close of the letter, John boils the issue down to “life,” or “life without beginning or end.” (I like that better than “eternal life” which carries such baggage.) Love is perhaps the single most important marker for the believer, but the issue that underlies it all is *life*.

And this recognition brings us back to the conclusion of John 20, probably an early ending to the Fourth Gospel.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have *life* in his name. (John 20:30–31, ESV)

In an earlier Divergence discussing John 20, I shared some things I'd read about the possible "purpose" of John's Gospel. Was it primarily for the community, or primarily intended as an evangelical tool, to bring unbelievers to belief. I think I decided that "both" was the best answer.

Here, though, it's clear that John writes to his community. For him, belief in the Name of Jesus brings "life." It means participating in a life that doesn't just go on forever, but has been since before God hovered over the deep. Belief doesn't cause us to "have life," the two things are almost of the same substance, existing in the same moment. (consubstantial? cotemporal? Is that even a word?)

And so, differently from John 20, the author here writes so that the readers may *know* that they who believe have life. Why? Because someone is saying they don't. This is the kind of attack the community is under. They're not being told they're wrong, they're being told they do not have "life." There is no reason for John to say it this way otherwise.

And knowing that? Knowing that makes all the difference. People who know they're embedded in the life that has no beginning, no end, they don't react out of fear and the anger that it breeds. They find a capacity to love that exceeds anything their hearts could ever hold, even for those who tell them they do not have life.

Gospel Text

The more I studied this text for 7 Easter from John 17, the harder it became to find something to write about. "Something," singular, to write about. John 17 is the climax of the farewell discourses that make up John 13-17, and in this portion the Fourth Gospel draws together so many of the themes and images that have appeared in earlier chapters.

So rather than try to find one thing to write about and miss all the others, I'm going to do something a bit different and isolate some themes and show how they fit into the Gospel as a whole.

"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world."

John 5:43 - "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him."

John 10:25 - Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me..."

John 12:28 - Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

"Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."

John 5:24 - Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

John 6:63 - It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

John 6:68 - Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life..."

John 8:31 - So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples..."

John 8:51 - Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you.

John 3:35 - The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

John 5:22 - For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son,

John 12:49 - For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.

And the next verse ties "word" and that which is "given" to Jesus together... "For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you."

“While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”

John 6:39 - And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

John 10:29 - My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.

All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.

John 12:28 - Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

John 13:31 - When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him.

John 15:8 - By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

John 13:35 - By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (sort of)

Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

John 10:30 - I and the Father are one.”

(This is a theme that only really manifests in John 17, but it’s so important I couldn’t pass it by.)

But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

John 15:11 - These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

John 16:20 - Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.

John 16:21 - When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.

John 16:22 - So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

John 16:24 - Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

John 1:10 - He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

John 3:17 - For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:19 - And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

John 8:23 - He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.

John 12:46 - I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

John 14:17 - even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

John 15:18 - "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

John 15:19 - If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

So we have a number of peculiarly Johannine themes, all brought together in this one passage:

The power of “word” to bring change.

That keeping the “word” that is given is equivalent to “life.”

That all that Jesus has is from the Father.

That Jesus guards His followers.

The exchange of glory between the Father and the Son, but here I was tempted to focus on just the one verse for this Divergence. The Son is glorified “in them.” That’s us. We are that which brings Him glory. Chew on that a while.

Oneness. It is shared between Father and Son, and in chapter 17, that oneness now extends to us.

Joy. This only really shows up in the farewell discourses, as well it might. Jesus speaks joy over those about to lose Him.

And finally John’s “dualistic” understanding of the “world” being over against the followers of Jesus. I tire of the “dualism” label that is so often applied to John. As much as John sees opposition from “the world,” Jesus constant refrain that He judges not but comes to *save* the world speaks to me of a more wholistic understanding. There are those who accept the words of Jesus and in them find life, and there are those still “in the world” who *have not yet* been saved. And strangely, it is the action of the world, the “lifting up” of Jesus on the Cross that brings Him glory and with it salvation. Even “the world” cannot help but work against itself.

And I just can’t quit being a preacher.