

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 5, Year B (track one)

First Reading

1 Samuel 8:4-11, (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15) (optional verses shown in parentheses and italics)

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots.

(And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants.)

He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, "No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles."

(Then Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingdom." So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the

LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed peace offerings before the LORD, and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly.) (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 3:20–35

Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.” And he called them to him and said to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has

forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” (ESV)

Comments and questions for Discussion

First Reading

I think it makes some sense to include the first set of optional verses for this week’s reading from 1 Samuel, but I cannot fathom why they chose to tag on two verses at the end that come 3 chapters later whose meaning will likely be grossly misunderstood, inserted as they are without context. I don’t think there’s a “rule” that says we must use all the optional verses or none of them. If there were I’d omit all of them rather than include that nonsensical pair of verses at the end.

There are two major elements to this reading, regardless of what we include. One is God’s declaration that the people’s request for a king is a rejection of God, not of the prophet, and second is God’s warning (through Samuel) of what a king’s reign will look like.

In the first case, scholars have long noticed that in v.7, God comforts Samuel by saying this is not a rejection of him (Samuel) but of God. But then, in v.8, God says quite the opposite, saying that what the Israelites have done to God throughout their history, they now *do to him (Samuel)*. A fair bit of ink has been spilled, trying to explain this. For the most part, the explanations seem to come down to attributing the two verses to two different sources, mashed together in the chapter as we now have it.

I did find one article, though, that suggested that there might have been a copying error, a *haplography*, (the inadvertent failure to copy a repeated letter) that resulted in God saying “so they are also doing to you.” The article’s author suggests that if the haplography is corrected, God would be saying, “So they are also making a king.” This would fit with better with the recitation of the people’s history up to that point while also agreeing with verse seven, so that it all would read,

“And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also making a king.”

I find this solution satisfying.

The second element of our reading for this week is God’s warning to the people about the nature of a king and the hardships he will inflict on them. Scholars have offered a number of opinions about the origins of this passage. Beginning in the latter years of the 19th century, it has been common to find them suggesting that this warning about the behavior of the king was actually a description of Solomon and his sons that was written by anti-monarchical (Deuteronomic) scribes in the wake of the exile, and then attributed to Samuel.

About the middle of the 20th century, commentators began to suggest other sources. These authors suggested that Samuel’s description was derived from texts constraining the behavior of early Babylonian or Assyrian kings. There are clear parallels between the descriptions of unjust rulers in these Babylonian and Assyrian texts and that of 1 Samuel 8. One author suggested that these texts be treated as a family of writings he called a “Mirror to the Prince.” That is, these were all intended for rulers by different groups within a ruled community to try to influence the king to behave justly.

The question then seems to me to be, “How much of this text do we attribute to Samuel himself?” The scholarly response, as I read it, would be “Very little if any.” After all, the book of 1 Samuel as we have it is clearly a post exilic composition. It contains much too much material that can be linked to the Deuteronomist to be read otherwise. Does that mean that the negative image of kings we find here has to come either from Israelites disillusioned by the failure of Solomon and his sons? Or from earlier Assyrian and Babylonian sources?

Here is where I come down. You know that I treat the Bible as inspired, that for me each word is important in some way for our instruction and growth. But you also know that I don’t think this means everything is meant by God to be taken literally. I also believe in inspired speech, in prophecy. So I think it’s possible that Samuel did issue warnings to the people about a king, perhaps with the intention of trying to circumscribe some of the king’s behavior. Similar texts arose then also in other kingdoms. It seems to me that certain ideas do rise up almost independently in different regions sometimes, and this may be one of those instances.

What is clear here is that ancient peoples recognized early the dangers inherent in monarchy and tried to limit them. To me, 1 Samuel 8 represents one of those attempts.

Second Reading

Our reading from 2 Corinthians for this week begins with a verse that is actually the climactic conclusion of Paul's defense of his apostleship (in particular the *manner* in which he conducts himself) to the Corinthians. So in order to understand 4:13 more thoroughly, it is necessary that I set it in context. (I have also included v. 15 to finish a sentence.)

2 Corinthians 4:7–15

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak,

knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (ESV)

What I've discovered doing my reading this week, is that the first verse of our assigned text is a quote from our Psalm 116 (Ps 114/115 in the Septuagint) in which the Psalmist recites the hardships he has endured, and which Paul and early Christians understood to be the speech of Jesus. This psalm, according to one commentator I read, is understood by Paul to be "the story of Jesus." Jesus has endured all these afflictions and yet raises up the "cup of salvation."

So when Paul enumerates his own sufferings, he does so for the sake of those to whom he writes, just as Jesus did for all of us. Paul does this both passively, afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, but also actively, "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus." And all for the sake of those to whom he carries the Gospel, "So death is at work in us, but life in you."

This should all be read in the context of Paul's defense of his apostolate. I think that it also tells us even more about those who oppose him. Last week I wrote a brief introduction to the letter, and in that I stated that I believe Paul's opponents (at the time of 2 Corinthians) are those who preach a renewal of the Old Covenant, not the new one in Jesus Christ. (Here's a link to that introduction.) As we try to understand Paul's opposition better, it seems clear that they are "hale and hearty," and that Paul's suffering is to be understood as a sign that his teaching is false, that he lacks God's favor. In our reading this week (with those few additions) we see Paul turning what they have tried to use against him as a mark of his true calling.

This reminds me of my time in Westbury. I had a good friend, the bishop of a local Baptist church (and overseer of a few others, which is why he was called a bishop). He was a good and humble man, but he wore suits that would have cost me a month's income and drove a very expensive car. This was not how he'd have chosen to live, but once he confided in me that this was his congregation's expectation. To dress any less expensively, to be seen in an ordinary sedan, these things would have shamed them. I felt sorry for him.

Then I traded in my 20 year old, faded Volvo for a new car. Nothing fancy, but a shiny new car. It was then that I realized that several members of my own congregation harbored similar feelings. They all *thanked me* effusively for finally getting a new car. They were ashamed of my old one. Where I had thought that modesty reflected well on me and them, they thought it reflected badly.

It seems that the Corinthians' tendency to equate appearances with God's favor hasn't died yet.

Gospel Text

Our reading from Mark 3 this week is part of a long pause in the larger chiasm that I have described in other Divergences that provide structure for the whole Gospel. If you look closely at the diagram of the whole chiasm, (LINK) you'll see that there's a long gap between C and D. This corresponds to a similar gap near the end of the Gospel between C' and B'. If the material between C and D were actually part of the chiasm, I'd expect the corresponding section to fall between D' and C'. After considering it for some time, I've come to the conclusion that both these sections without chiastic links to the other half of the Gospel are meant to be extensions of C and C'. This would be why they follow both.

Here in chapters 2 and 3, after Jesus' testing in the desert, we have a series of controversy stories. Following Jesus' testing in the Temple in chapter 12, we have more controversial teachings from Jesus. In chapter 3, Jesus is accused of being out of His mind and possessed by Beelzebul. In chapter 14, Jesus is accused of claiming to rebuild the Temple in three days, of blasphemy.

What I have in the latter chapters of Mark is a relatively well defined Passion Narrative that follows on His testing in the Temple. This I think he inherited from Matthew, with some Johannine influences. It just wasn't going to fit into Mark's larger chiasm, so he balanced that by adding a significant amount of material that also follows Jesus' being tested by Satan in chapters 2 and 3. (And structuring some of that as a small chiasm! See last week's Divergence.)

I know that doesn't have a great deal to do with the text itself for this week, but it does set a bit of context. Mark sees this as related to the controversy that swirls around Jesus at the end of His life, and that may help us understand it better when we get into it.

First, we have the controversy about Jesus and Beelzebul. And the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit." I have heard and read much too much speculation about just what that blasphemy might be. It scares people to think that there's something they might do that cannot be forgiven.

This will have a certain echo in the accusation of blasphemy in chapter 14, but what we need to keep in mind here is what Jesus really says, and it's not that there's an unforgivable sin. What he says is that choosing to see what Jesus does as the work of the devil means that you will not have forgiveness. Why? Because that's what Jesus just did. He forgave the sins of the paralytic who was brought to Him. He proclaims forgiveness left and right. So if you attribute Jesus' works to Beelzebul, you close yourself to His work, which is forgiveness. Of course we can repent of that decision, and in so doing, have forgiveness. But for as long as we cling to that belief that Jesus' forgiveness is not of God, we close ourselves to it. It's really pretty simple.

Then we have Jesus' comments on His family.

"Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

This seems harsh, but let's keep it in the context of its parallel in chapter 14. Jesus' family thinks He's out of His mind. In chapter 14, Jesus is accused of claiming to be able

to rebuild the Second Temple in three days. (Much larger than Solomon's Temple!) The claims against Jesus here in chapter three are harsh, too.

And so Jesus redefines family as those who do the will of God, of His "Father." This doesn't *exclude* his kin, but it places identity as a child of God above biological relationship. It may still seem harsh, but do any of us not know someone who had to choose between biological family and their true identity as given them by God? The one doesn't *exclude* the other, but it does supercede it.