

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 14, Year B (track one)

First Reading

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

And the king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom.

So the army went out into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. And the men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the loss there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.

And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak, and his head caught fast in the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.

...

And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him.

...

And behold, the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, “Good news for my lord the king! For the LORD has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you.” The king said to the Cushite, “Is it well with the young man Absalom?” And the Cushite answered, “May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man.” And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 4:25–5:2

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give

grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 6:35, 41-51 (omitted verses included in italics)

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (ESV)

But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 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. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our text from 2 Samuel this week skips about to give us a Reader's Digest version of the conclusion of the disastrous rebellion of Absalom, David's son. It harkens back to Nathan's prophecy that "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house." But the whole of the story of the fall of two of David's sons, Amnon and then Absalom, marks the dissolution of David's reign in the wake of his taking of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah.

Earlier we have the story of Amnon, who rapes his sister, Tamar, mimicing his father, unable to manage his desire for her. Then David fails to discipline him as he deserved. I don't think it's too great a stretch to think that David, aware of his own abuse of power in taking Bathsheba, finds it impossible to punish his son for the same offense. But Absalom knows what is deserved, and kills his brother.

Absalom flees into exile, but Joab, David's most trusted servant, eventually devises a way to have David receive and forgive his son. Then Absalom abuses David's mercy and begins to build sympathy for his own ambitions in the gate, giving judgment and crying, "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice." Absalom, great in beauty (and vanity to go with it) and ambition, eventually overthrows his father, but his inability to reign (he follows bad advice in dealing with David) and his own vanity (the hair of which he is so proud is what catches in a tree and leads to his death) bring him down.

Joab, ever David's pragmatist, ignores David's instructions to "deal gently with the boy" and kills him, though our reading skips over Joab's part in Absalom's death.

Absalom dies and the sword has its way with David's house. And David mourns, very publicly.

Worth noting here is the shift in the people's response to David's lament. At the death of Saul and Jonathan David likewise mourned, the people respected him for it. This time, though, they despise him.

All of this flowing inexorably from David's decision to take Bathsheba for himself.

Second Reading

Our reading from Ephesians this week suffers from being truncated. You'll notice that it begins with a "therefore" phrase and then concludes with another one. What they've done is given us one section of the epistle introduced by "therefore" followed by the introductory sentence to the next section, which makes little sense. I can understand why they wanted us to hear the words of 5:2 which we so often hear as an offertory

sentence without all of the warnings against immorality and darkness, but for the purposes of study, it hardly works.

What I think we have are two sections of the letter introduced by “therefore,” and each of them is in response to an admonition earlier in the chapter. So we have,

Ephesians 4:25–32

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

and,

Ephesians 5:1–21

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,

and Christ will shine on you.”

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

And each of these goes back to something Paul said earlier in the chapter, so we have,

Ephesians 4:17–19

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

which Paul builds upon with,

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor... (and what follows)

and then,

Ephesians 4:21–24

assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

which is built upon by,

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (and what follows)

I know that makes for a lot of simple reproducing of chunks of the letter in the Divergence, but I couldn't figure out how to illustrate the parallelisms between the earlier part of chapter four and what follows late in chapter 4 and into chapter 5.

Now, here is what I draw from all that when I consider our reading from this week (all but the two verses from chapter 5 which introduce something different) in the context of Paul's larger purposes for the letter.

It appears that Paul is still writing to the "Gentile" portion of the congregation and telling them not to act like Gentiles. That is to say, they have an identity that supercedes "Gentile." As I wrote in an earlier Divergence, in Roman thought, one's "Roman" identity took precedence over any other which would be derived from the region or nation of one's origin. So here, there is an identity in Christ which supercedes what it meant to be (only) Gentile.

And that identity would be to become a part of the greater Israel that is inaugurated in Jesus. This also points back to a discussion of the church as a continuation of the historic Israel for Paul versus (as some commentators would argue) the church as something new and lacking continuity. Jesus creates the unity "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." And what that unity looks like is "a holy temple in the Lord." (2:21) That is, the "new Temple" prophesied by Ezekiel.

Gospel Text

Last week I explained why I think that John's Gospel is much older, more original than most scholars think it is. I went on to suggest that historical criticism's own "criterion of difficulty" makes it all the more likely that Jesus spoke these or very similar words, because they're so offensive and hard to understand that the author of the Gospel isn't likely to have reproduced them unless he believed Jesus had really said them.

Many will still disagree that this "Eucharistic Discourse" is from Jesus, but as you read farther, it seems good for you to know where I'm coming from.

This week I'd like to focus on two phrases from our reading and try to explain to you how I read them. The first would be, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." The other will be, "It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.'"

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them." Since this is the same Jesus who says in John, "When I am lifted from the earth, I will draw *all* people to myself," it doesn't seem likely that this phrase means that the Father condemns some to

everlasting death because they haven't *yet* come to Jesus. That's the thing, that word, "yet." Jesus is here explaining why some have not *yet* come to him, not why some never will. John's Jesus is very clear. No one shall come to the Father except by Him. But He puts no timer on it.

"It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.'" Actually, I searched the Scriptures and it's not written anywhere, at least not that way. Even my study Bibles lack a footnote that would guide me back to some prophet who said this. I think Jesus is referring to Jeremiah 31:33. It reads, "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." This is a reference to Jeremiah when God's people will have God as their instructor (written on their hearts is a metaphor for having memorized what the scribe is teaching you).

Do I believe that Jesus actually said that those who eat of the bread that is His body will never die? Yes. I don't think it's a writing of eucharistic language back into John's Gospel. Do I fully grasp what that means? I can't imagine that I do. I'd suggest that these words of Jesus' are worth discussing!