

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 18, Year B (track one)

First Reading

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 (omitted verses in italics)

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor meet together;
the LORD is the Maker of them all.

*The prudent sees danger and hides himself,
but the simple go on and suffer for it.*

*The reward for humility and fear of the LORD
is riches and honor and life.*

*Thorns and snares are in the way of the crooked;
whoever guards his soul will keep far from them.*

*Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

*The rich rules over the poor,
and the borrower is the slave of the lender.*

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of his fury will fail.

Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed,
for he shares his bread with the poor.

*Drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out,
and quarreling and abuse will cease.*

*He who loves purity of heart,
and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend.*

*The eyes of the LORD keep watch over knowledge,
but he overthrows the words of the traitor.*

*The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!
I shall be killed in the streets!"*

*The mouth of forbidden women is a deep pit;
he with whom the LORD is angry will fall into it.*

*Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.*

*Whoever oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth,
or gives to the rich, will only come to poverty.*

*Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise,
and apply your heart to my knowledge,*

*for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you,
if all of them are ready on your lips.
That your trust may be in the LORD,
I have made them known to you today, even to you.
Have I not written for you thirty sayings
of counsel and knowledge,
to make you know what is right and true,
that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?*

Do not rob the poor, because he is poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate,
for the LORD will plead their cause
and rob of life those who rob them. (ESV)

Second Reading

James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17 (optional verses in brackets)

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. [For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.]

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and

one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 7:24–37

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

After only two bits of the Bible’s narrative of the reign of Solomon, our lectionary shifted last week to the book known originally as the Song of Songs, only later in its life called the Song of Solomon. This week and next two we get texts from Proverbs, another book written (edited) by someone else and then later attributed to the king.

This week’s text includes a couple of verses (the last two) that are part of a smaller “book of wisdom” within Proverbs, one that scholars have identified as the editor’s reworking of a similar, Egyptian source, the wisdom of Amenemope. Since the connection to

Egyptian wisdom writings became apparent, scholars have since found relationships between Israelite wisdom literature (of which Proverbs is the most obvious example) and other Near Eastern wisdom.

What is true of Proverbs (and other Israelite wisdom) is that the authors/editors have reworked, the wisdom literature known to them, shaping it to their own understanding. And that understanding is peculiar to the followers of Yahweh in that world. In a book I read many, many years ago (*The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* - Julian Jaynes) the author spoke at some length about the peculiar genius of the ancient Israelites, they're concern for the poor and powerless. Given the human propensity for scapegoating the "different," whether an individual or group, the decision to refuse to make scapegoats of such a convenient group seems to me to be truly "inspired."

I am often dismayed by the makers of the lectionary, the way that they skip about and omit so many verses, choosing only those that seem to fit their program. This week, I'm rather glad they did. I find much of Proverbs tedious, myself, but this week our lectionary choosers have cherry picked a few verses from chapter 22 that are truly illustrative of that peculiarly Israelite "genius." I included a lot of other verses above, initially because that's just how I do things in the Divergences, giving you the whole picture. But look at the non-italicized verses. Take note of the way they stand apart from the others. These few excerpts we have for this Sunday come from being servants of Yahweh. Yahweh is beginning to shape the Israelite consciousness and we can see it in the editing of the book we know as Proverbs.

Second Reading

Our second reading for this Sunday is an unfortunate combination of the conclusion of James' admonition to be "doers of the Word," (1:22-2:13) and the beginning of his declaration that "faith without works is dead." As a result, we don't get to read the fullness of James' argument in either case. (Sigh.)

In the excerpt that we have, though, James' discussion of his readers'/hearers' showing of favoritism is directly link to his call to be doers. That is, they were *not* doing the word when they favored the rich and powerful. There are two bits here that I'd like to discuss. First, this showing of favoritism was deeply embedded in the social stratification of the day. The wealthy were judged by the favors they bestowed on the city and its inhabitants, and the lower classes gave favor to the rich in hopes of being the recipients of such beneficence. That is, one favored the wealthy so as to *become* wealthy. This is what James objected to.

This then sets James second comment on God having chosen the poor to be rich in spirit in a clearer context. As the readers of the letter had failed by seeking to be made rich by the wealthy, they would do better to show favor to the poor, who might make them as rich in spirit as they. I think that liberation theologians of the 20th century made much too much of God's "choosing" of the poor when they made this central to their argument for revolution. James here is arguing that God has *already* made them rich, and that his readers had much to gain from seeking to be similarly wealthy.

Then we have James famous, or infamous refutation of Paul's assertion that one is justified by faith alone and not by works of the law. Some have argued that he wasn't as opposed to Paul as it seems, but I cannot find any strength in those arguments. James forces us to choose. Either we agree that faith without works means nothing, or we don't.

This opposition to Paul seems all the more virulent when it is read immediately after James' claim that favor should be shown to "the poor in the world." There is a thread that I believe I can trace through the New Testament that finds expression in the group known as the Ebionites. The first external reference to call them by name dates from Irenaeus (circa 180) but the first indication that there was such a group goes back to Justin Martyr, from about 160 CE. This group's name means "the poor ones." They chose voluntary poverty and rejected Paul's Gentile gospel utterly. While this group is known only by name in the next century, I find it very likely that it existed in a nascent form much earlier. Those opponents of Paul who demanded Torah observance of anyone who wanted to count themselves Christian are surely the spiritual ancestors of the Ebionites. The Poor.

So to find James' declaration that justification cannot come without works, following immediately on his assertion that his readers should show favor to the poor who are "rich in spirit," all this is highly suggestive. James stands with the forebears of the Ebionites.

So what do I make of all this. We have two different Gospels, Paul's and James'. I've said many times that I think every word of Scripture is meant for our edification. How can this be, though? Here's how I work it out for myself.

James is almost right. Paul is correct that justification is by faith alone, but we keep reading it as if it is *our* faith *in* Jesus that justifies. In almost every case where "faith in Jesus" is mentioned by Paul, what he actually says is "faith *of* Jesus." That is, we are made just in the eyes of God by the faithful act of Jesus, His going to the Cross. Putting our trust in that truth then carries us from the "world" to "kingdom" reality. We are justified. And having been justified apart from any works, we then find it impossible to

live the old way, seeking worldly security (to become wealthy by showing favor to the wealthy). Faith, putting our trust in Jesus' faithful act, that doesn't manifest in "works", is impossible. If our life doesn't change, we haven't really put our faith in what God has done in Jesus. But that doesn't mean we're not justified. Even if our faith in the faith of Jesus is lifeless, His self-giving on the Cross is not nullified. We just don't enjoy it. We're still trapped in this "world."

I think that the misreading of Paul, the choice of faith *in* Jesus as that which justifies, began early. It led to some libertine interpretations of Paul's Gospel to which James objected, and rightly so. And God preserved all of this in the Bible so that we could see the necessity of 1) reading Paul correctly and 2) seeing the way that misreading him leads to unhealthy backlash.

Gospel Text

The two stories included in this week's reading from Mark are also a part of that pause in the larger chiasmic structure of the second Gospel. As I suggested last week, this lacuna in the chiasm seems to me to be a section included specifically to build tension towards the climax of the triptych of Peter's Confession, Jesus' first prediction of His Passion, and God's declaration about Jesus' identity on the mountain.

Last week we had Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees concerning purity. This week we have two other elements that contribute to their determination to be rid of Him. First, Jesus extends God's grace (healing) beyond the boundaries of God's chosen people. Then he heals the deaf man, and though He tries to keep what He's done quiet, people just proclaim it all the more loudly, "He has done all things well!"

When I was reading about these texts this week, one author described Jesus' interaction with the SyroPhoenician woman as "the most troubling text in all of the New Testament." While I think there are others that could give this passage a run for its money, I understand what he was saying. Still, I have always read this in a way that makes it much less offensive. I'll share that with you here.

When Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, it is not right to throw the children's bread to the dogs," He is reciting in abbreviated form what most Jews probably believed in His day. That is, that God would first raise up Israel as a "light to the nations" but that eventually all the Gentiles, the "dogs" would be drawn to God through the glory bestowed on Israel.

But here's the key. Saying it doesn't mean Jesus' accepted it. How many times in the Gospels does Jesus know the hearts of those gathered about Him? Is it likely that He did not know in that moment, too? Of course not.

The woman comes to Jesus. He knows the reaction of His disciples gathered around Him. Even if they accept that the "dogs" will one day be blessed too, it isn't their time. But Jesus also knows the faith and the trust of the woman before Him. So he rejects her, using words that the disciples would likely have used, words they were already thinking. I can just see them all sitting around Jesus nodding as He says this.

But the woman persists, as Jesus knew she would do. Aha! He rewards her persistence, declaring that the people of one's origin, whether Israelite or not, makes no difference. Aha! A teaching moment. He has drawn His disciples in by quoting their own thoughts, then overturned those same thoughts while they listened.

That's what I think is going on in that story.

In the second story, Jesus opens the ears of the blind man. Most of you know my determination to see healing restored to its rightful place in the life of the church. For me, healing is not just something done for the individual, but a demonstration to the world of the nature of the Love of God. It is an evangelical tool. A sign of the presence of the Kingdom.

As Jesus' successful healing of the deaf man contributes to His unpopularity with the scribes and the Pharisees, so also healing will be misunderstood by some in the church. It promises something radical compared to the church who sees its purpose as just helping us get from day to day while doing a little good along the way. Healing says that something frighteningly powerful is at hand. Something powerful enough that we might choose not to put up with the status quo any longer. Some will find that threatening.

Jesus' opponents certainly did.