

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 19, Year B (track one)

First Reading

Proverbs 1:20–33

Wisdom cries aloud in the street,
 in the markets she raises her voice;
at the head of the noisy streets she cries out;
 at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
 and fools hate knowledge?
If you turn at my reproof,
behold, I will pour out my spirit to you;
 I will make my words known to you.
Because I have called and you refused to listen,
 have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,
because you have ignored all my counsel
 and would have none of my reproof,
I also will laugh at your calamity;
 I will mock when terror strikes you,
when terror strikes you like a storm
 and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
 when distress and anguish come upon you.
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
 they will seek me diligently but will not find me.
Because they hated knowledge
 and did not choose the fear of the LORD,
would have none of my counsel
 and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way,
 and have their fill of their own devices.
For the simple are killed by their turning away,
 and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but whoever listens to me will dwell secure
 and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.” (ESV)

Or,

Wisdom 7:26-8:1

For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

Though she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;

for God loves nothing so much as the man who lives with wisdom.

For she is more beautiful than the sun,
and excels every constellation of the stars.
Compared with the light she is found to be superior,

for it is succeeded by the night,
but against wisdom evil does not prevail.

She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other,
and she orders all things well.

Second Reading

James 3:1–12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of

God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 8:27–38

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

(Proverbs)

The poem or song that comprises 1:20-33 of Proverbs one has been described as one of two “introductions” to the larger book. It functions as a second one, as Psalm 2 is a second introduction to Psalms. This makes sense, as its structure is much more cohesive than most of the other collections of proverbs. (Though those collections do show coherence in theme and purpose.)

But this introduction is even more structured than I had initially imagined. Phyllis Tribble has outlined the chiasm that shapes the poem and pointed out the four pairs of themed verses that center on the day of calamity in the center of it all. Here's a diagram of the chiasm.

- A Beginning with a public appeal (vss. 20-21)
- B to all who are unwise (vs. 22)
- C that they heed reproof as disclosure (vs. 23),
- D wisdom supplies ample Reason in the negative responses of the people to her (vss. 24-25)
- E for her climactic Announcement of derisive judgment when inevitable calamity strikes severely (vss. 26-27).
- D' As the Result, wisdom refuses to respond to the people because they "hated knowledge and the fear of the LORD they did not choose" (vss. 28-30).
- C' She declares continuing trouble (vs. 31)
- B' for the unwise who cause their own destruction (vs. 32).
- A' Alas, the remnant of her hearers is singular (vs. 33).

Tribble's conclusions about the chiastic structure of the song are inescapable. But what I didn't find in the article is an appreciation of the way that the second half of each pair in any chiasm is *transformed* by passing through its center. So to those who would not listen, when the day of calamity comes, Wisdom will not listen, either. The center of the chiasm turns everything on its head. So those who do not listen are not listened to (D and D'), those who will not be filled with the spirit become filled with their own devices (C and C'), those who choose to be simple or foolish are destroyed by their foolishness (B and B'), and those who do choose to hear Wisdom's call dwell secure and will be at ease (A and A').

When we recognize a chiastic structure, whether in secular or sacred literature, we do well to look for the transformation that follows on the crux of the form, its center. Here we can see that the author of this poem or song of Wisdom anticipates the day of trouble. No one is spared it, but those who listen to the song become those who pass through it unharmed. We can safely say then, that as an introduction to Proverbs, we can expect to find this then repeated again and again. (And of course we do.)

Or,

The Book of Wisdom, also known as the Wisdom of Solomon

In our first option, we had a song *by* Wisdom. In our second, a song (or poem if you like) *about* Wisdom. It comes to us from a book called the Book of Wisdom which was likely written in the late 1st century BCE or the early 1st century CE. Only later was it attributed to Solomon. It was probably written in Alexandria, a Jewish response to the wisdom literature that was popular there. It shows clear marks of Egyptian influence, not least of which is this poem extolling the virtues of Wisdom personified, modeled on the Egyptian goddess Isis.

Because there is so little to say about Wisdom literature (it speaks for itself so often) I will go off down a “rabbit trail” here about the texts that enjoin us to desire Wisdom above all else. While our excerpt does not say that explicitly, this text, praising her beauty and value, still leads to that same conclusion.

The rabbit trail I’ll follow today is to read this from a Girardian perspective. If you aren’t familiar with Rene Girard, I have written elsewhere about him and his teachings. Here’s a [LINK](#) to a more detailed summary than I’m about to give. But in short, he demonstrated that human violence can be traced to “mimetic desire,” that is, to our pattern of imitating the desires of others. We find desirable what others find desirable. This inevitably leads to rivalry and conflict, and violence ensues, often resulting in the death of a scapegoat.

At the core of this I see that the basic problem is that you and I cannot desire the same object without conflict, because we can’t both have it at the same time. But this is where our texts on Wisdom (and many other texts in the Bible) come in. To desire Wisdom (not just knowledge, but that aspect of God that can be bestowed on us) is to desire that for which there is no limit. You and I can share our “mimetic desire” without entering into rivalry. To set our desires on God, to mimic one another’s desires for God is the only real way to eliminate scapegoating and the death and violence that accompany it.

Humans have tried a host of means by which to contain and control this inevitable rivalry. Prohibition, myth, ritualization of the scapegoat mechanism, but none of these work in the long run. However, shifting our desires to an Object whom we all can share in equally can and will resolve things. I see in the calls to desire Wisdom an early awareness of what God would have us enlist as our primary tool in dismantling violence.

Second Reading

Until this week, I had always thought that the Epistle of James was written by a Jewish Christian author to other Christians. Now I’m not so sure. If we read it for its plain sense, it is addressed to Jews who do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. After all, it begins with, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes

in the Dispersion. Greetings.” When the author refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, he uses “my,” not “our.” There is no Christian greeting, there is no Christian blessing at the end. I had never noticed these things before.

Reading this letter for what it says it is, a letter to the Jewish Diaspora from a Jewish believer in Jesus, makes much better sense of the emphasis on justification by works that I discussed last week. It renders a lot of the discussions about just who the addressees are, when they try to find symbolic or metaphoric meaning in the “twelve tribes of the Dispersion” rather silly.

But reading it for its plain meaning also gives new insight into the passage we have from the third chapter this week. The opening of the chapter deals with those who would be teachers. That doesn’t seem to be very specific, Jewish or Christian, the admonition is worth our attention. But then James goes into a discussion of the power of the tongue. Now, I confess to having used the earlier verses somewhat out of context, when I found it necessary to confront a tendency to gossip in my congregation, but read as a whole, the opening verses about the tongue are really only a set up for the teaching about cursing one another. And this is where the reading of this text as one addressed to Jewish non-believers in Jesus makes a big difference.

Some of you may know of the work that began mid-20th century concerning the role of the *Birkat ha minim* in the relationship between Jews and Christians in the first century. The *Birkat* was a curse added somewhere around 70 CE to the eighteen blessings required of observant Jews. It is a curse on heretics (*minim*) but at some point it also began to include a curse on *notserim*, that is Nazarenes, or Christians.

While some doubt has recently been cast on the history and form taken by the *Birkat*, there remains sufficient evidence that something like it existed, and that Jews did routinely curse Christians, at least by the second century. Given this, the juxtaposition in James of blessing and curses coming from the same source, the same tongue, becomes clearer. We can now ascertain just what curses it was that troubled James, and why they concerned him so.

I have probably done a disservice to the work of the author on which this particular bit of Divergence is based, so here’s a [LINK](#) to the whole article. It isn’t too long, and it’s pretty easy to read.

Gospel Text

Finally we come to the center of Mark’s chiasm, the focus of the entire Gospel. Though it climaxes with Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, the axle on which the entire Gospel turns is

here in chapter 8, as Jesus foretells His death and resurrection, and Peter rejects this teaching and is firmly and publicly rebuked by his master.

Our text for this week actually begins with Peter's confession of Jesus, "You are the Christ." But that isn't meant to function on its own. It is paired with God's declaration at the Transfiguration, "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him." (9:7) To read one without the other is to render invisible the contrast between Peter's confession which was clouded by his misunderstanding of what that meant, and God's declaration, which serves to reinforce Jesus' prophecies concerning His future.

As I studied this section of Mark again this week I discovered a couple of things I hadn't noted before. First is that Jesus' rebuke of Peter is much more stark than our translation has it and at the same time, more restorative than we probably read it.

The phrase that is mistranslated here is "...you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." While it could be read this way, such a translation totally overlooks the fact that this phrase about setting one's mind "*ta tou theou*," is a well attested idiom of the Greek of that time which mean to take the side of someone. So, the older RSV translation had it right, "Get behind me Satan, for you are not on God's side, but on man's side." Jesus does not rebuke Peter for having wrong ideas, but being "on the wrong side."

But this rebuke is tempered by Jesus' command to "get behind me." This is not Jesus saying "Get out of my sight!" but rather, "Get behind me (again) as when I called you to follow (behind me) as a disciple." Peter is critiqued boldly in front of the others, but he isn't sent away, he is put back into his place as a follower of Jesus.

Given Mark's emphasis on contrasting two incompatible images of the Messiah, John's picture of a conquering monarch and Jesus' choice to be a suffering servant, the choice this Gospel offers to its hearers is nowhere more starkly revealed than in this moment. "Whose side will you be on? God's or Man's?"