

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 25, Year B (track one)

First Reading

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 (omitted verses in italics)

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.’
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them, and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer.

And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him. And each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold.

And the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning. And he had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys. He had also seven sons and three daughters. And he called the name of the first daughter Jemimah, and the name of the second Keziah, and the name of the third Keren-happuch. And in all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters. And their father gave them an inheritance among their brothers. And after this Job lived 140 years, and saw

his sons, and his sons' sons, four generations. And Job died, an old man, and full of days. (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 7:23–28

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 10:46–52

And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart. Get up; he is calling you.” And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And the blind man said to him, “Rabbi, let me recover my sight.” And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Last week, I shared with you a new way of reading God’s speech to Job that was gentler, more compassionate than the way I’d always thought it should be read. God shows compassion for Job’s sufferings rather than “taking him down a notch.” I had come

upon an article that argued that God's speech concerning Job's absence at the moment of Creation wasn't intended to put him in his place, but to acknowledge the reason that Job couldn't begin to understand why such terrible events had come upon him. If you missed that Divergence I'd recommend it to you. It makes such a difference in the way that we can read these closing chapters of the book.

So imagine my delight when this week I found an article by Pieter van der Lugt that argues that we are similarly misreading the opening verses of chapter 42. That they are not a poem uttered by Job about his "repentance in dust and ashes" but a poem in which both God and Job speak, and in which it is God who repents, not Job!

It turns out that this passage has been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion in recent decades. Some have even argued that it is not all the work of one writer, though that opinion doesn't seem to hold. But a lot of the discussion revolves around the difficulty of translating verse 6. The traditional way of reading the text has been that "Job abases himself and repents, confessing himself to be no better than dust and ashes on which he has been sitting." But recent studies of this verse have demonstrated vividly that the meaning of the Hebrew here is much more ambiguous than that.

For this reason, we see certain differences in translation. So this reading from the ESV and NRSV both say something like, "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." But several other translations have something like what we find in the New American Bible, "Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes." That's because there is no clear object of the verb "reject" in the beginning of the verse (translated despise in our translations). So, some see Job rejecting himself, others his words from earlier. This is why yet other translations admit the difficulty and put their added words in brackets like the Amplified Bible, "Therefore I retract [my words and hate myself] And I repent in dust and ashes."

I will not try to condense what is a rather exhaustive discussion by van der Lugt. He builds a convincing case built on certain prepositional structures in v. 6, the meaning of "dust and ashes" elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the strophic shape of this poem as a whole that it took me a while to decipher. But the basic conclusion he gives us is this: The poem is not all the speech of Job. In vv. 2-3, Job speaks, in vv. 4-6, it is God who speaks.

So in vv. 2-3, Job speaks, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted." Then he quotes God, "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Then he speaks again, "Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

But then God replies. This is made clear by the beginning of v. 4, where God says, “Please, hear and I will speak.” (Interesting that the interjection “please” is left out of all the translations!) Then God goes on to say, “I will question you, and you make it known to me.” This sounds at first like God being “high and mighty” again, but perhaps it isn’t. Remember the gentler tone with which we have been enabled to read God’s speeches from earlier chapters. Perhaps God’s tone is not so arrogant as we might have thought. Rather, God refers to those words of consolation that brought to light the unbridgeable chasm between God’s thought and human thought. An explanation of confusion, not a demonstration of Job’s smallness.

Then, as in the earlier strophe, we get the shape, “Speaker speaks, speaker quotes the other, speaker speaks again.” So God summarizes Job’s response to God’s otherness, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” This is a positive response to Job’s humility, which is followed by another of God’s acts of consolation.

This is where I wish van der Lugt had read the article by T. C. Ham that I cited in last week’s *Divergence*. But I suspect that van der Lugt’s article was well along in the writing/publishing process (2014) when Ham’s was made public (2013). If he had, he might have spared himself the way he reads v. 6 at the end of his article, “therefore, I reject my offensive attitude displayed in my preceding speeches and have compassion with you as my stubborn mortal creature.”

Before giving you my version of that last verse, I do need to share with you one *vital* important insight on it from van der Lugt’s article. “Dust and ashes” is not a reference to the dirt on which Job sits. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures “dust and ashes” is a reference to a human being, a mortal human being. So when God speaks of dust and ashes God speaks to Job lovingly, to that faithful servant (calls Job this six times) who is faithful, but unchangeably mortal. So then, God’s last words to Job are not “I reject my offensive attitude,” but “I reject all that has happened to you, and have compassion on my mortal servant.”

So put all that together and we have God replying, “Please, hear and I will speak. ‘I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.’ Therefore I reject [all that has happened to you], and have compassion on my mortal servant.”

Of course, reading chapter 42 of Job this way tosses thousands of years of “repenting in dust and ashes” into a cocked hat, but, I don’t know. That sounds like a good thing to me.

Second Reading

Last week our reading from Hebrews contained a portion of the letter's discussion of Jesus as a priest in the order of Melchizedek, that is as a priest apart and above the Aaronic or Levitical orders. Melchizedek is deemed superior because he is not appointed by virtue of his lineage, but because he is chosen by God. So then Jesus' priesthood is also superior. This sets the table for this week's reading.

Jesus' superior priesthood surpasses even that of Melchizedek, as Jesus is not limited by death, nor is He required to make offering for his own sins, or to make offering repeatedly, as His offering, once made, suffices. The superiority of Jesus' priesthood, while an important thing in and of itself, carries a new weight when we consider the theme of sojourn that was identified in the first Divergence on Hebrews.

In that one you'll recall that while scholars have generally agreed on the idea of "sojourn" as a binding thread running through this letter, most have tended to see this in terms of the Babylonian captivity. Matthew Theissen, however, has persuasively suggested that we read Hebrews so as to see the gift given in Jesus as the "rest" promised in the Exodus. That rest, never truly achieved by Joshua or David, is finally manifest in Jesus.

When we read this week's text from Hebrews, the long-sought conclusion to the wandering of the Exodus makes an important background. You know that the priesthood to which Jesus' is superior began during the time of wandering. Harkening back to the lessons a couple of weeks ago, you'll remember that phrase, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." It was during the wilderness time that Moses built the Tabernacle, in the center of which we find the "mercy seat."

By Jesus' sacrifice, says the author of Hebrews, we are *all* enabled to approach that throne, that mercy seat, not just the high priest on our behalf. Here we find the manifestation of the "rest" that was denied the first wilderness generation (Ps. 95:11) and vainly sought in the promised land. But Jesus renders the constant offering of sacrifice unnecessary. His priesthood, of which all others were (and are!) but a shadow, offers us rest not just from our enemies, but from ourselves, from the assaults of our own sin. We have but to turn to the Throne of Grace, the Mercy Seat to find help in time of need.

Gospel Text

I have noted in other recent Divergences that the second half of Mark's Gospel, at least up to Jesus' Passion, is largely concerned with discipleship. As Jesus makes His way to Jerusalem and His inevitable death on the Cross, Mark shows us again and again what it

means to be a disciple. (And in the case of the twelve, often what discipleship does *not* look like.) Three weeks ago, we had the disciples arguing over who would be greatest. Two weeks ago we were introduced to the nameless young man who goes away sad, but who will eventually return to become the ideal proclaimer of Jesus, in contrast to John in the first half of the Gospel. Last week the disciples were once again arguing about status, with the sons of Zebedee asking to sit on either hand of Jesus.

This week we meet another ideal discipleship image. I can see how Mark has alternated these stories now, negative, positive (if not clear about that yet), negative, now positive. Bartimaeus is the image of Mark's believer. Though blind, he "sees" Jesus far better than anyone else. He calls Him, "Son of David," a messianic title akin to Peter's confession. He is persistent, seeking Jesus over the objections of those around him. And when he's called, he casts aside his cloak, a fundamental mark of his identity as a beggar. (He'd have spread this in front of him to catch the coins others tossed him.)

When he is asked what he wants, he is clear, he wants to see again, and his faith makes him well. Then, leaving everything behind, he follows Jesus "on the way." The way, *ho hodos*. An early description of those who followed Jesus. It was the name of a Christian group I hung out with in college for a while. It was almost the name of this website (instead of The Vicar's Keep, but *Ho Hodos* was too obscure). Jesus doesn't ask him to follow, he just does because he knows who Jesus is.

We will soon encounter another image of an ideal disciple in the woman who puts her two coins into the treasury. Like her, Bartimaeus casts aside his former source of identity and security and trusts in God. He is as powerful an image of discipleship as we will find in the New Testament, I think.