

Divergence on the Lectionary - Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

First Reading

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 (Omitted verses in italics)

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.

And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.

They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 12:12–31

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. (ESV)

Luke 4:14–21 (verses 22-30 added in italics)

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Physician, heal yourself.” What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away. (ESV)

Questions and Comments for Discussion

First Reading

I included in the text above the two verses that were omitted, just so you’d know what they were. Sometimes I complain about the verses that get cut out, because it appears that it was done to avoid having us read something that’s painful to hear, especially in church. I tend to think that Christians need to learn to deal with the whole Bible, not just the pretty parts.

But this week? If you read the verses that were cut out I think you’ll agree that this was done to make it easier to read by the lector in church. This used to be one of those

Sundays on which NOBODY wanted to be the first reader in church, because the older lectionary left all that in. Not only is it better for the readers, but for congregational decorum. I can tell you that those verses have elicited plenty of chuckles from the congregation over the years! And there's no laughing in church! (just kidding)

Now to set this in context. Nehemiah has convinced the king of Persia, who has conquered Babylon, to let the Jews whom the Babylonians had taken captive to go back to Jerusalem. Many, but not all go home. When they get there they find the city and the Temple in ruins. It is not the kind of homecoming they'd wished for, I'm certain.

They were in Babylon for 70 years, so I think it's unlikely any of the folks returning had any memories of the city, but they'd heard stories, and their imaginings were probably even more beautiful than the reality had been. So they're really sad, at best.

Then someone finds a scroll of the Book of the Law of Moses (most likely the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible) in the ruins of the Temple. There must have been great rejoicing to hear the news, and Ezra and Nehemiah gather everyone to have it read aloud. Just hearing the holy texts read aloud should encourage the people! Of course, they need interpreters in the crowd because no one speaks Hebrew any more, so the Levites cover that duty. Then they read it, and instead of being encouraged, everyone begins to mourn, because they see clearly how far they have fallen away from the glory to which they were called by the God who'd rescued them from the Egyptians and led them through the desert for 40 years until they came to this place.

And here's the verse I want you to take away from this reading, it's Nehemiah's response to this grief.

“Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Brothers and sisters, there is a place for godly sorrow in the life of a Christian, when we recognize the gap between where we are and where we've be placed by virtue of God's forgiveness in Jesus.

But if it persists it is not of God. Remember what it says in Psalms 30:

Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

In the end, all reading of Scripture leads us to joy. God is not glorified by weeping Christians. God is glorified by those whose faces are as radiant as Moses' was after spending time with God in the Tent of Meeting. If you read Scripture and you are captured by condemnation, that is not the work of God, it is the work of the enemy, whispering those interpretations into your ear. Reject it.

I need to add this. This is not a rejection of all grief. There is also the grief that comes with real loss, and there is no condemnation in feeling that, either. It's normal and healthy, and not nearly as easy to define or put in a box as we used to think. What I'm talking about is the sting that comes when we read of the saving God and instead hear the condemning God. That's the sort of thing that leads people away from Him, not to Him. Yes, we've failed, but the value for me in that is that it makes the wonder of God's love all the greater.

“The joy of the Lord shall be your strength.”

Second Reading

Two things about this reading to consider.

First - Paul is clearly displeased with the kind of social stratification that is happening in Corinth. This is a church that is much too well pleased with the spiritual gifts they've received and are exercising. And they're belittling those who have “lesser” gifts. When he says “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’” He is speaking to people who have said just that to someone in the church! The verses before it are there to encourage those who've been told they're “not a part of the body” because they don't have the flashy gifts. Remember, this letter was read aloud in the congregation, so both the “gifted” and the “lesser gifted” would have heard it all together. Paul recognizes, values the spiritual gifts, but he deplors the elevation of some to the belittlement of others that some have used them to create.

Next, I'd like to point out the various orders of ministry as Paul sees it.

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Hmmm.. I don't see bishop, priest, deacon in there anywhere. That isn't to say that the orders we use aren't also a gift from God. I believe they are, and we have some, largely indirect, biblical evidence for them.

But where did these others go? I mean, apart from Sunday School teachers, where are they? These were real offices in the earliest church, and I personally regret that we've lost them for the most part.

Gospel Text

Our text from Luke for this week is sometimes called "Jesus' first sermon." He preaches it to the folks of His hometown. It is the shortest "sermon" I think I've ever heard or read. Unfortunately, the choosers of our lectionary decided to leave out the unhappy reaction of the congregation to His preaching.

I chose to include (indented) those verses.. Jesus' "gracious words" weren't well received. Especially if we read the Greek the way it should be read. Unfortunately, scholarship has known for ages that verse 22 is probably mistranslated in every Bible I've ever looked at, when it says, "And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'"

It is indeed remarkable that Jesus would respond so caustically to that kind of praise. But the phrase "Is not this Joseph's son?" a kind of questioning of His authority to speak such grace, and His response, "Surely you will quote to me this proverb..." make much better sense if we translate verse 22 properly.

The Greek *does not say* "They all spoke well of Him." It says "witnessed (no preposition, just the next word, Him, is in the dative case) Him."

Dative case is generally translated "to, or at." So translators, enamored with Jesus' words in the light of the revelation of His full identity after His death and resurrection, go with the ordinary translation. "They witnessed to Him." Then they add a few words to make sure we understand what *they want* the the Greek to say. "They spoke well of Him."

Except there's another way to translate the dative case here, and it makes much better sense. Joachim Jeremias was the first scholar to point this out, many years ago. There is something in Greek called the "dative of disadvantage" which would mean that it could (and should, in this case) be translated "they witnessed *against* Him" instead of "to Him." Or, if we do the translator thing and add a few words to make it clearer, "They spoke ill of Him." Then the question "Is not this Joseph's son?" and Jesus' response to the obvious resentment, "Doubtless you will quote to me.." starts to make perfect sense. And things, well, they go downhill fast from there. (Pun intended.)

So then, we are left wondering why they would “speak ill of Him,” when He has just cited a passage many of them love and probably know by heart, Isaiah’s prophecy of the restoration of Israel and all his people from chapter 61. What could be offensive in that?

Quite simply, it isn’t what Jesus said, but what He didn’t say. He left off the last half of the final couplet of that passage from Isaiah 61. It really reads,

to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

Jesus left off the part about God’s vengeance being the manner in which God will comfort the mourners. For a people who had lived under the thumb of one despotic empire or another for hundreds of years, the image of God taking vengeance on their oppressors must have been a precious one. And Jesus left it off. Imagine them, sitting and listening to Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, probably mouthing the words along with Him as he reads. They continue on to finish the couplet, but Jesus stops. The murmurs of a memorized verse shiver in the air as the reader goes silent. And then He has the audacity to say that this *truncated* text has just been fulfilled in their hearing.

“What? How? How dare you?” And they all witnessed against Him, saying “Is not this Joseph’s son?” And of course, Jesus’ reply is stinging.

Now it makes sense. Jesus will have nothing to do with vengeance. And we don’t particularly like that.