

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

First Reading

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 (omitted verses in italics)

And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.'

And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck.

And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50 (omitted verses in italics)

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 6:27–38

“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.” (ESV)

Comments and questions for discussion

First Reading

There was little available to me about this story to get my mind going. But I will share with you an interesting tidbit I came across, from the ancient midrashic rabbis. This commentary dealt mostly with the verses that were omitted for this Sunday, which is part of the reason why I included them above. (Apart from the fact that I can't figure out why you'd want to omit them at all...)

It troubled the rabbis, seeing Joseph appear to make the same mistake that his father had made, showing favoritism to Benjamin. They maintained that Joseph could not have been so stupid as to make his brothers jealous of Benjamin in the same way his father had made them jealous of him (Joseph).

To this group of rabbinic interpreters every letter has significance, so when they noted that the Hebrew actually says that Joseph fell on Benjamin's neck to weep, “neck” is in the plural. He fell on Benjamin's *necks*. From this they derived prophetic insight on Joseph's part. As there had been two Temples in the land given to Benjamin, so Joseph weeps over the destruction of them *both* when he weeps on Benjamin's *necks*. I know this sounds far-fetched, but we do well to remember how these texts have been interpreted in the past.

Now, we all know the story of Joseph and his dreams and his wonderful coat. We know about his being sold into slavery in Egypt and his journey toward the place of trust given him by Pharaoh. When famine strikes, his brothers arrive, less the youngest and their father. They don't recognize Joseph. He sends them back for the youngest, then pulls a rather dirty trick on Benjamin by putting their gifts back in their saddlebags.

I've often wondered why Joseph pulled all those shenanigans with them when they showed up. Had he not decided what to do? Did he need to test them to see if they would abandon the brothers he required them to leave as hostages? I don't know.

Still, the “motto of the story” seems to be Joseph's assertion that what they had meant for evil, God had meant for good.

Do you think God inspires people to do evil so that He might bring good out of it? That seems to be what this says, but I don't buy it. Personally, I do believe that God is able, from the worst evil, to bring some good. I mean, we have only to look at the Cross, right? But I don't think God *causes* evil, even if it might serve His purposes. That's on us.

But this rather long story does serve as an antetype for Jesus and His crucifixion. Through the (intended) death of one person (Joseph) a whole family, and through them, a whole people is saved when that son is exalted.

Are there other parallels you can draw out from it? Where does the parallel run out of legs and fail?

Second Reading

I hope that the context I tried to create for this chapter last week continues to shed light on this week's reading. I think you can see how well this passage fits into Paul's desire to confront the Corinthian error that led them to believe that they already enjoyed eternal life in a way that obviated any sort of resurrection.

So, all the talk of a resurrection body is once again not intended to comfort those who know their physical bodies will waste away in death, but to convince the Corinthians that the body they enjoy is *not* the body they'll enjoy in resurrection life.

Instead of focusing on that, I'd like to point your attention to another theme that Paul refers to here and there, and how I believe that fits into Paul's theology. I'm speaking of his references to a "first Adam" and a "last Adam." There was a good deal more of that in the extra passage I included from 1 Corinthians in last week's divergence.

In First Corinthians the first and last Adams serve the purpose of grounding the Corinthians in their humanity. Though they are heirs of resurrection life in Jesus, they continue to be heirs of death in Adam. I think we often read this backwards from Paul's intended reasoning, as if he wanted to say that, just as we are heirs of death in the first Adam, so are we heirs of death in the last Adam, Jesus. Though this may also be true, I don't think it's Paul's reasoning in this letter. This is much more the way he makes his argument in Romans 5.

But now I'd like to point to another of the ways that this reference to the first Adam works in Paul's thinking. In order to see it we have to go look at his letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 3:25–29

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (ESV)

In his arguments for the sufficiency of faith Paul describes what it is to be baptized into Christ, to have put on Christ. His description reads “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Take note of the way that Paul's rhythm changes as he recites the pairs. Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, then suddenly male *and* female. He's saying neither/nor, and could easily have said “male nor female” but he doesn't. Why?

Here's my take. Paul uses these pairs to walk us backwards through the story of God's relationship to humankind, by naming the three great divisions that have characterized it.

Jew nor Greek. This is the great division that Paul's readers know. The division between Jews and the gentile world.

Slave nor free. He's not saying that there's no difference between them. He's referring to the great division that led to the Exodus, the slavery of God's people in Egypt.

Male *and* female. A reference to the Creation story in Genesis. That's why it reads “and” rather than “nor.” Because in the creation story God creates humankind “male and female” created He them.

But before there were “male and female” Genesis 2 goes on to tell us how the two came from one, the first Adam. In this Adam there are not male and female, just Adam.

I think, as we read Paul, it's instructive to keep in mind the way that he sees Jesus restoring us to that first Adam's state, before the separation of male and female, before humans knew slavery or Jew/Gentile division.

In Galatians this thinking supports his assertion that relationship to God predates the divisions he's trying to battle, and how grace is manifest through faith, not obedience to law, but I think this understanding of his also underlies many other positions he takes,

including on women. He did *not* preach the subordination of women, because to him, women were in this first-Adamic state that gave no place to either gender.

Gospel Text

Our reading this week picks up from last week's Lukan version of the Beatitudes and continues with what some scholars have humorously called Jesus' "sermon on the plain" as opposed to "on the mount," as this is Luke's version of much of the same material from Matthew.

Instead of commenting a lot this week, I'm going to lay out a couple of parallels from one Gospel to the other, then suggest that you ask yourselves why Luke would have chosen to edit Matthew in this fashion.

Matthew 5:43-45

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (ESV)

Luke 6:27-29

"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. (ESV)

Matthew 5:46-48

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ***You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*** (ESV)

Luke 6:32-36

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. ***Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*** (ESV)

As you ponder Luke’s purpose in rearranging the Sermon on the Mount this way, keep in mind the questions, “Who was he writing to?” and “What was his overriding concern?”