

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

First Lesson

Jeremiah 17:5–10

Thus says the LORD:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man  
and makes flesh his strength,  
whose heart turns away from the LORD.

He is like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see any good come.

He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,  
whose trust is in the LORD.

He is like a tree planted by water,  
that sends out its roots by the stream,  
and does not fear when heat comes,  
for its leaves remain green,  
and is not anxious in the year of drought,  
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick;  
who can understand it?

“I the LORD search the heart  
and test the mind,  
to give every man according to his ways,  
according to the fruit of his deeds.” (ESV)

Second Lesson

1 Corinthians 15:12–20 (21-34 added for context)

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead

are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (ESV)

1 Corinthians 15:20–34

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. *For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.*

*Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? Why are we in danger every hour? I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame. (ESV)*

Gospel Text

Luke 6:17–26

And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. (ESV)

## Comments/Questions for Discussion

### First Lesson

As the empire of Babylon bears down on Judah and Jerusalem, Jeremiah warns that, while while their own bad choices have brought this calamity upon them, continuing to rely on human wisdom and might will bring only greater calamity. In Jeremiah’s prophecy the successful invasion by the Babylonians is a foregone conclusion, but he still holds out hope for God’s people if they will turn away from their reliance on themselves and turn to God for guidance and support.

Perhaps the second section of our reading this week sounds familiar to you. It did to me. After a little study I realized why. It seems to elaborate on Psalm 1, verses 1-3:

### Psalm 1:1–3

Blessed is the man  
    who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
    nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree  
    planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,

and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers. (ESV)

Some scholars maintain that this is an indication that Psalm 1 was a part of the psalter than Jeremiah knew and used. It seems quite possible to me. No matter the source, though, the image of the tree planted by a stream whose roots still have access to water in times of drought is a powerful one to me.

Perhaps you know someone who just seems to be able to stay centered no matter the circumstance, whose foundation seems unshakeable, who can comfort others in the midst of their own trials. I think this is the kind of person Jeremiah sees when he describes “the man who trusts in the Lord.”

Have you known someone like that? Can you imagine the impact we could have on our local setting if we were all that person?

## Second Lesson

I included some more of 1 Corinthians 15 to create a little more context for this week’s passage. Taken alone the text lacks some of the near desperation I hear in Paul’s voice if we read the rest of that section.

The setting, apparently, is this: Some, perhaps many of the members of the Corinthian church, so enamored of the gifts of the Spirit that manifest among them, have taken a very wrong turn in their thinking. They seem to believe that “there is no resurrection of the dead.” This doesn’t mean they think there’s nothing after death, but instead that they have somehow already transcended death, and will not die. There will be no “resurrection” for them because they will not pass through the gateway of death.

Paul makes clear in the section that I added that, “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” So, as Adam passed on death to us all, so also Jesus passed on resurrection *from the dead*. So there’s no escaping death, but there is an answer. And the close of the passage I added also suggests that this assumption that they (the Corinthians) have transcended death is a contributor to the laxity in their behavior and morals. It’s as if they’ve also transcended “mere morality,” and this appalls poor Paul.

Two things about this passage then. First, it’s read often at funerals as though Paul were trying to reassure his readers that there is indeed resurrection life after death. In context, it’s clearly more of an assertion of something quite different. It’s sort of “Yes, there’s resurrection, but not without death!”

Second, and this goes back to my teaching on 1 Cor 14 into which I veered a couple weeks ago, which suggested that there might have been some awareness in Corinth of Johannine teaching (when Paul seems to remind them that the Word, the Logos, came from a woman, Johannine language for Jesus). This assumption on the part of the Corinthians that they were already living the resurrection life and would not die sounds a little like Jesus in John when He's speaking to Martha. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

I believe this adds weight to my suggestion that the Corinthians did know something of the teachings of John's community in Ephesus and that Paul was indeed referring to Mary when he asked "Was it from you (masculine plural) that the word came out?" (*exelthen*, not just *elthen*) as he corrected the Corinthians for silencing women.

I can't think of any specific modern manifestations of this "above it all" kind of theology, but perhaps you can? Or bits of it that have shown up in one place or another?

#### Gospel Text

You've probably already noticed this, but there's a striking parallel between Matthew's Beatitudes and the Gospel text for today. Though the order is reversed, both contain a set of "blessings" and a set of "woes." This kind of parallel has led many scholars to conclude that Luke's is closer to the original speech of Jesus, and that in fact he (Luke) is holding truer to his source, which these same scholars would call "Q."

No, it's not a James Bond reference. It goes back to an attempt throughout much of the 20th century to make sense of the fact that Mark, Matthew and Luke are so similar and yet have significant differences. Clearly there's some relationship between them, and figuring out what that relationship might be has resulted in spilling an awful lot of ink on an awful lot of pages.

No single solution has emerged as a unanimous favorite, although the "two source hypothesis" probably has more adherents than any other. In this hypothesis Mark and a lost source called "Q" provided most of the material for Matthew and Luke. Each used Mark and Q differently, leading to the variations in order and language we find in Matthew and Luke.

Personally, I find the two source hypothesis not only unsatisfying but unworthy of consideration. First, it relies on the existence of a (dare I say "mythical"?) source called "Q" (short for Quelle, German for "source" or "well") of which we have no copy. If it were

so important that both Luke and Matthew used it it's hard to imagine that no one preserved even a shred of it. Second, a group of scholars has offered a perfectly plausible alternative for the similarities and differences between Matthew and Luke that doesn't depend on scholarly imagination. Beyond the Q Impasse - Luke's Use of Matthew lays out this other hypothesis in an almost irresistible fashion. When I first wrote this Divergence, I thought it unlikely that the Q hypothesis would go away any time soon. After all, a good number of careers rested on it. However, in the three years since I've noticed fewer and fewer references to it, and more and more reliance on alternate theories. It does seem that perhaps Q has had its day.

I believe that Luke knew and used Matthew. I'm not sure about Mark, but as most of Mark can be found in Matthew, I don't think it matters too much. (Apart from my also unpopular opinion that Mark was not earlier than Matthew and may well have condensed Matthew for catechetical reasons.)

Given then that Luke knew and revised Matthew, what are we to make of the way that Luke rearranged the "Beatitudes" and added those "woes?"

For me, it goes back to what I think is Luke's primary purpose in writing another Gospel (as I think he knew at least Matthew and perhaps Mark). I mean, why write another one?

I'm going to get into a lot of stuff not directly related to this week's lesson here, so forgive me. But I would like to plant in the back of your mind this idea of Luke's overarching purpose, so that we can read the Gospel in Year C together with that as our backdrop.

Luke writes at the close of the first century or the very early second. The church to which he writes is already fractured along Jewish/Gentile lines (see Galatians!). Despite the Jerusalem conference at which the Apostles accepted Paul's mission to the Gentiles with some minor requirements (I'll get to the Noahic Covenant another time) significant segments of Jewish Christianity did not accept Paul or his work among the Gentiles. It seems likely to me that the disdain had begun to become mutual, that Gentile Christianity was beginning to consider itself superior to, or at least no longer rooted in its Jewish history and foundation.

We can see some of that in how pleased the Corinthians were with themselves, how they divided themselves according to which evangelist they followed, but this way of looking down on Jewishness is most evident in Paul's letter to the Romans, where he works very hard to change the behavior of the "strong" (Christians who'd cast off Jewish law)

toward the “weak” (Jews in their congregation who had not yet accepted the same freedoms they enjoyed).

But I see it also in Luke and Acts. I don’t have space to lay it all out here, but I will over time as we walk through the Gospel. Luke is very careful to show the way that Jesus and his parents are very obedient to Jewish law in the early chapters. Paul is respectful toward Jewish law and customs when circumcises Timothy, when he had his hair cut in Acts 18:18.

Luke is, in my opinion, telling the story of Jesus and that of the early church so as to try to build bridges to hold together Gentile and Jewish Christianity. He tells us the story of Mary and we hear the Magnificat, which any Jew of that time would recognize as a close parallel to the song of Hannah when she learns that she is pregnant with Samuel. This isn’t for Jewish Christianity. They already see Jesus as an extension of their Jewish faith. It is for the Gentile church, of which Luke was a part, to root them in their heritage.

There will doubtless be other opportunities to go into this as we progress through Luke, so I’ll focus back on this week’s lessons and the blessings and woes.

As we read this week in Jeremiah, this pattern of linked blessings and woes was characteristic of Jewish prophecy. Matthew has Jesus speaking woes over certain groups, but it isn’t grouped in this way with the Beatitudes. Luke on the other hand relates them as paired. Why? To emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus. This also transforms the earlier blessings from “teachings” as they are presented in Matthew into something more akin to prophecy, which is also characteristic of Luke’s method in trying to bind up a broken church.

That method, and I’ll get into it in greater depth later, is to tell the story of Jesus and the early church in a way that emphasizes the activity of the Holy Spirit throughout, the same Holy Spirit who empowered the prophets of old, who spoke through Hannah, who ties the Jew to the Christian, working in and through both. So emphasizing Jesus’ prophetic inspiration in this week’s lesson fits that Lukan goal as well.

Whew. I’m sure this has been too much to swallow all at once, so I hope you took it in small bites!