

Divergence on the Lectionary - Ash Wednesday (all readings)

First Reading

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow a trumpet in Zion;
 sound an alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful people;
their like has never been before,
 nor will be again after them
 through the years of all generations.

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
 “return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 and rend your hearts and not your garments.”
Return to the LORD your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
 and he relents over disaster.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
 for the LORD your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
 gather the people.
Consecrate the congregation;
 assemble the elders;
gather the children,
 even nursing infants.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her chamber.

Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep
and say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'" (ESV)

Or,

Isaiah 58:1–12

"Cry aloud; do not hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet they seek me daily
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.
'Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.
Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?

"Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'
If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
(ESV)

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 6:1–6, 16-21 (omitted verses in italics)

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,

*hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.*

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading (Joel)

How to read Joel... When we read him in the context of Ash Wednesday, the opening of the season of Lent, of repentance, the words take on a heaviness that perhaps he never meant them to have.

Now that I get to read Joel without the many burdens of planning Lenten meetings and meals and worship, I have had time to read more about this remarkable prophet than I ever have before. I have discovered the wide variety of opinions as to his place, in time and in purpose. And I have found an author whose way of reading Joel and giving him his historical place resonates deeply with me.

First I should acknowledge that scholars have variously dated Joel's work from somewhere in the ninth century BC to the very end of the prophetic period. From well before the exile until well after it. But when I came upon an article by Elie Assis (Bar Ilan University in Israel) a lot of the confusion fell away. It won't do to try to recount all the reasons that other methods of dating Joel fail to persuade, (I'll try to link the article at the end for those of you with the inclination to read it.) it would take too long. I want to point to the way that Dr. Assis understands Joel's message and purpose and the way those things locate the prophet in Judah's history.

The first thing Assis notes is the utter absence of rebuke for sin in Joel. There is the acknowledgement of disaster that has befallen, there is a call to turn to the Lord, but there is no rebuke. This absence, more than anything else (as I read the article) locates Joel in the midst of the exile. He speaks to a people mired in the depths of despair, for whom life has lost purpose, especially in light of the destruction of the Temple. In that context, rebuke is worse than meaningless, it only contributes to the despair.

Instead, Joel calls the people to repentance, but not a repentance for sin or for wrong worship, a repentance, a turning from despair. The prophet holds up the reality of God's presence among the people of Judah even in the physical absence of the Temple. He calls them to hope. God's call to the people takes on fresh life in that context.

Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep
and say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"

I find in this reading of Joel a real balance between acknowledgement of the weight of the disaster that confronts the people and the hope to which they are still called. It doesn't ignore the situation, neither does it bow the neck to despair.

This would make a really good theme for Lent, I think. Better than feasting on our guilt, better than turning from all that confronts us and simply "taking on a new discipline." A balanced theme for Lent.

Oh, and here's the link to Dr. Assis paper on Joel - [The Date and Meaning of the Book of Joel](#)

Or, (Isaiah)

In my studies before trying to write anything on Isaiah 58, I came across a paper that shed an entirely new light on this passage, and in fact, also on the first option from Joel. In an article for the Harvard Theological Review, David Lambert casts serious doubt on the penitential function of fasting in the Bible. While he acknowledges that fasting often occurs in times of crisis, the function of the fast is *not* to express penitence, but to heighten the appearance of affliction, to grasp God's attention, to say, "See how miserable we are!" (Or, in the case of the individual, like Hanna in 1 Samuel, "See how miserable I am.")

If you are anything like me, this conclusion will take you quite by surprise. We are so accustomed to reading the texts as penitential that we do not recognize that hundreds of years of Jewish and Christian practice is almost forcing this assumption, though these traditions post-date the Bible by centuries.

I will not try to reproduce Lambert's arguments here. I could not give them proper attention in so short a piece, [but here is a link](#) to the article in JSTOR.org. (Remember, you can create a free account!) Instead, I will try to show how this new understanding affects the way I read our Isaiah text, as well as the one from Joel above.

"Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?" Clearly this dovetails perfectly with Lambert's conclusions. Fasting, a way of humbling oneself, of enacting one's misery physically, is *meant to get God's attention*.

Then God explains why this does not get God's attention. Because even as they make themselves additionally miserable, they inflict misery on others. Others whose misery God *does* see! And then God goes on to explain the sort of thing that *does* get Their attention, "to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh..."

As we enter into the season of Lent, I am struck anew with the impotence of penitential fasting. And I am encouraged, especially as so many turn their backs on the least powerful among us, to find that reaching out to them is a truly biblical way of getting God's attention.

Second Reading

When I read again this passage from 2 Corinthians I get pulled in several different directions. I read “He made Him to be sin who knew no sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God,” and my heart flies off in one direction. But then I read, “Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (I really want to put an exclamation mark at the end of that sentence!) and I’m equally enraptured, but my heart and mind are in a very different place. And finally I read, “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything,” and I just want to weep. (Joyful tears, mind you...)

Now I have to read all that and sit down and figure out what to write and it’s really difficult. Each of those segments is worthy of a whole sermon series (to me) and there are really good bits in between them that I just haven’t mentioned yet.

Perhaps, since these same lessons come around every Ash Wednesday, I’ll share some of my joy in each of those pieces individually in years to come. This year I’d like to try to tie it all together.

Our reading for Ash Wednesday comes in the midst of Paul’s continued defense of his ministry among the Corinthians, though it is differently presented here. Rather than defending himself to the recipients of the letter(s) (scholars generally agree that 2 Corinthians is made up of pieces from several letters) Paul is trying to give the recipients the means to “boast about him” (Paul), that is, to defend him among those who are caught up in appearances. (This is all in the verses that come earlier in chapter five.)

And so I find Paul oscillating between the glories of the Gospel he preached among them and elucidation of the contrast between what is apparent on the surface (beatings, poverty, etc.) and the truth of his identity in Jesus Christ. He could have focused on one or the other, but for Paul they are inextricably entwined. It is precisely those things that others ridicule that commend him and the Gospel he preaches. Paul doesn’t ignore the way that he appears to others, but neither does he dwell on it as if that were what validated him. It is the Gospel that validates him, validates them. That God made Christ to be sin on our behalf. And it is the Gospel that makes it true that in spite of appearances, now is the day of salvation, not some time in the future when Paul is healed and everything is better. The Gospel’s present reality is that which makes it true that Paul can appear to have nothing and yet possess everything.

How does your identity in Christ contradict your circumstances? How does it undergird your proclamation of the Gospel?

Gospel Text

Our Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount, and this time to the admonitions against doing what we do for God for the wrong reasons. I think that what we take away from this reading depends ever so much on the tone we hear in Jesus' voice. Do you hear Him speaking sternly, almost angrily as He contemplates those who blow trumpets before them as they give to the needy? Or do you hear His love for them, and for those to whom He speaks? What if you heard Him suppressing a chuckle as He spoke about His misguided but beloved children?

I have maintained and continue to maintain in these Divergences that commandments, rules, precepts, whatever you want to call them are not meant to be proscriptive, but descriptive. Each contains within it the grace to accomplish it. If we have to work at keeping them, we're going about it backwards.

So if I'm making sure everybody knows how much I pledge to my church every year, my job is not to do a better job of keeping it to myself, my job is to figure out what's lacking in my relationship to God that makes me think I need to tell everybody. There's a grace to be had in figuring out that lack. Graham Cooke (a favorite teacher of mine) likes to say there's an "upgrade" available to me in discovering that I'm acting out of a lack, not out of God's abundance.

So I read this passage from Matthew and I think, "Okay, here's a place where I can see that I'm still striving for some recognition for what I've done. So, God, what's the upgrade you want to give me in my relationship to you so that I won't want that any more?" That's real repentance. Not changing my behavior, but turning to God to find in Him what I've been lacking, that thing that's made me turn elsewhere to try to fill it.

I hear these phrases from the Sermon on the Mount and the voice I hear is chuckling as He says, "So, Jeff, remember that thing that happened last Thursday? When you did thus and so? Boy, have I got something better for you than that!" And with a grin and a chuck on the shoulder He offers me the new upgrade in my relationship to Him that, until this moment, I wasn't ready to receive. If I'm hurting it might not be a chuck on the shoulder, it might be a bear hug, or even a kiss, but the point is that He isn't wagging His finger, He's inviting me into an even better relationship to Him than I've had yet.

That feels like a really good way to spend Lent. "Okay, Jesus, what's the next thing You have in store for me?"

I mentioned Graham Cooke above. I'd like to share a teaching of his. Here's a sample of the wonderful way that he has of sharing who God is and who He enables us to be.

▶ It's the end of being upset with yourself.