

Divergence on the Lectionary - First Sunday in Lent, Year C

First Reading

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.’ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God.

“And you shall make response before the LORD your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 10:8b–13

“The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 4:1–13

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’” And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God,
and him only shall you serve.”

And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you,
to guard you,’

and

“On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

I couldn't find anything interesting in the literature available to me on Deuteronomy 26 this week, so you get some of my musings...

How many of us treat our pledges as an occasion for rejoicing? Not many I'd dare say, and yet that is clearly the purpose of the first fruits offering described in Deuteronomy.

So here, clearly, is an opportunity for “repentance,” that is, a changing of our thinking, a changing of our minds. Why does God ask that we give? Clearly not because God needs anything, so what then? We might argue that this is God’s way of reminding us that we are utterly dependent on Him, sort of “keeping us in our place,” but that’s obviously not what God has in mind in Deuteronomy 26.

“And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.” The purpose of the first fruits offering, what we’d call our pledge, is to cause us to rejoice! It’s purpose is to draw our attention back to the wonderful things God has done for us (The Exodus, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus) and to rejoice in the One who has brought us out of darkness into light, out of slavery into freedom, out of death into life.

But why, I might ask (and I have) couldn’t we just have a liturgy to remember these things and to rejoice in them? Why give back what God has placed in our hands?

As it turns out, God knows me better than I know myself. That is to say, God knows that this act of returning to God what has come from God *alongside the act of worship and rejoicing* produces in me a much greater sense of gratitude. And God likes it when I feel gratitude.

Not because God needs or wants my gratitude. No, that’s silly. But because God knows that gratitude is the place wherein my heart finds its greatest rest, its greatest joy. And God desires that rest, and that joy for me. It’s just plain good for me. Check out the Harvard Study - [“Giving Thanks Can Make You Happier.”](#)

And as we’ve all said before, and heard said before, it isn’t always about material gifts. Some of have money to give back, others time, others gifts and talents. The point is giving with no expectation of return, and doing so *alongside* worship and thanksgiving, each intensifying, strengthening the other.

What examples of giving along with thanksgiving can you recollect from your own life?

Second Reading

First off, this reading on its own lacks sufficient context to be read properly, so here’s some context:

Romans 10:1–13

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

But what does it say?

"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (ESV)

I've inset the earlier verses from chapter 10 of Romans so that you can see that today's lesson is a part of Paul's discussion with the Roman congregation concerning the place of his own people, the Jews, in God's plan of salvation. Read alone (and I regret this choice on the part of our lectionary chooser people) this short passage appears to be focused on the reader's salvation. Read in context, it is about the larger question of salvation, and how it's independent of one's ethnicity or cultural heritage.

Romans is a tricky letter to read. And, God help me, I'm going to get too wordy here and try to undo some of the damage that has been done by preachers and teachers of Romans in the past. Forgive me.

Romans has been treated by commentators and preachers and teachers alike for a very long time as a kind of summation of Paul's theology. Perhaps because it is likely the last of the letters he wrote, it's seen as Paul drawing all his major theological points together in one place. His "Summa Theologica."

It isn't. It's a letter, written to a particular community in a particular setting, about the particular situation or situations they face. Just like all his other letters. He does seem to explain himself more than in many of his other letters, no doubt in part because he's writing the only letter we have that he wrote to a community he hasn't yet visited. But that doesn't make this his Systematic Theology.

Understanding the situation about which he's writing and the believers to whom he's writing is absolutely required if one is to grasp what he's saying at any given moment. Scholars have written a fair amount on that subject, but no one has put forward as clear a case for the purpose and intended readers of the Letter to the Romans as Mark Nanos in his book "The Mystery of Romans." The book is a re-edit of his doctoral dissertation, and it makes great bed time reading. It is magnificent but so dense it will put the worst insomniac to sleep. It has pages where the text on the page occupies only the top inch or two of the page and the rest is footnotes. Ouch.

But Dr. Nanos gets Paul like no one else, and perhaps because he, Mark Nanos, is Jewish. Whatever the reason, Mark reads Paul with a fresh eye that lacks any need to justify the church's theological adaptations of Paul and simply read what he says.

And here, in a nutshell that probably does terrible injustice to Nanos' work, is the situation that Paul addresses. (I last read this book about 25 years ago.)

The nascent church in Rome has for some time depended on the local synagogue for cover, for a place to gather and worship. This was the case for many, many first century churches. In the era of emperor worship it was illegal for any other religion to gather. At all. Except for the Jews. The conquering Romans had long since decided that the Jews were just too fanatical about their faith, and keeping them in line was more trouble than it was worth. So Jews, throughout the empire, were allowed to gather to worship.

Christians, at this early stage an offshoot of Judaism, even among its gentile adherents, were not allowed to gather *unless they did so under the auspices of the local synagogue.* So the Roman church had been doing that.

Then Claudius (emperor from 41-54 AD) expelled all the Jews from Rome. At the time of the writing of Romans (around 55 AD) the Jews are coming back into Rome, but the local Christians are not treating them with the same hospitality with which they had been hosted before Claudius. They are worshiping together, but the Christians appear to be lording it over their displaced brothers and sisters.

Paul's chief concern? That the Christians treat their Jewish brethren and forerunners with the respect they are due as the People from whom Jesus came into the world, and

to live alongside in them in a way that the way they treat those who have not yet come to faith in Christ have no stumbling blocks put in their way.

I can't get into all the ins and outs of the way that first concern works itself out in the letter. I'd put you to sleep even faster than "Mystery" did me. But any time, every time you read Romans, please keep that in the back of your mind. "How does this passage play into what Paul is trying to do here?"

So.. How then do you imagine this passage fits into Paul's larger scheme?

Gospel Text

I've mentioned to you in other Divergences the way that I believe Luke knew and used Matthew (and maybe Mark) to address his own overarching concern, the preservation of the unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians which was threatened by deep divisions. This concern of Luke's seems to me to govern most of his choices about what to include, what not to include, and how to order the telling of the story.

In this week's telling of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness we find one glaring difference from Matthew's telling of the same events. Luke takes the second and third temptations and reverses them. That raises the fascinating question, "Why?" It may seem unimportant to you, but I don't think it is. It would have been very simple for Luke to leave this section as he found it, but he needed to move the last two temptations around. Why?

I'm not certain, but here's my take. Matthew concludes with Jesus on the mountain top, declaring that we shall worship God, and God alone. Jesus looks very much like Moses in this moment. Not just the mountaintop, but looking out on a world and having Satan tell Him he can rule it. It's very much like the Moses atop Mount Nebo, when God shows him all the land of Canaan that He will give to the people of Israel, but tells Moses he shall not enter into it. Satan offers this to Jesus and Jesus declines. Of course Satan has no inkling that Jesus will one day rule over all those kingdom anyways.

But that Jesus/Moses connection was vitally important to Matthew. We'll find other similar links in Matthew's Gospel as well.

But this isn't as important to Luke. Luke goes to great pains to emphasize Jesus' Jewishness, especially in the early chapters of the Gospel, His origins in Nazareth, His birth in Bethlehem, His parents' obedience to the law, His presentation in the Temple, His visit to the Temple as a boy. But Luke doesn't emphasize the Mosaic parallels. By moving the kingdoms temptation to the middle, Luke moves it out of the place of

greatest impact, the “last word.” I don’t think he was trying to emphasize the “don’t put God to the test” trial, just de-emphasize the mountaintop temptation by putting it in the middle.

And then, just to make sure that at the ending of all that we don’t get caught up in that moment, Luke does a little foreshadowing, “And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

And that “opportune time” comes in Luke 22:3, “Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve.”

We’ll get to that later in Lent! That’s enough for now.