

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C

### First Reading

Isaiah 43:16–21

Thus says the LORD,  
    who makes a way in the sea,  
    a path in the mighty waters,  
who brings forth chariot and horse,  
    army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
    they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
“Remember not the former things,  
    nor consider the things of old.  
Behold, I am doing a new thing;  
    now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
    and rivers in the desert.  
The wild beasts will honor me,  
    the jackals and the ostriches,  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
    rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
    the people whom I formed for myself  
that they might declare my praise. (ESV)

### Second Reading

Philippians 3:4–14

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the

power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, *if it is possible that* I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

### John 12:1–8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.” (ESV)

## Comments/Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

This week’s first lesson comes to us from the middle of the three sections of Isaiah. You’ll recall that in previous weeks I’ve talked about how scholars divide Isaiah up into three parts, (or two in some cases). First Isaiah runs from chapters 1-39. Second from 40-55 (or 40-66) and Third Isaiah from 55-66. First Isaiah was written to the people of Isaiah’s time, dealing with contemporary issues of corruption and external threat (Assyria) and God’s judgment, both on Jacob and on the nations who oppress Israel. Second Isaiah seems clearly intended as comfort to the Israelites who find themselves in captivity in Babylon. Third Isaiah appears to be written with the people in mind who have returned from exile, whose spirits are quenched by the destruction to which they

have returned. Scholars tend to think that a school of prophets founded by Isaiah is responsible for the second and third portions.

You will also, I hope, remember that while I do recognize the different sections of Isaiah as having different intended hearers, I don't personally accept that this means the later portions were written (or given/spoken) by persons other than Isaiah. My own personal experience of prophesy causes me to believe that one person could have foreseen and spoken to all three of those situations.

That said, I don't think that it makes too great a difference which way you choose to see it. In either case it is the same Holy Spirit at work.

And this week's reading reminds me of the very old joke about how many Episcopalians it takes to change a lightbulb. (Four. One to change it and three more to talk about how much better the old one was.)

"Do not remember the former things," says Isaiah to the people in bondage in Babylon. "Don't look back, look forward to the new thing I'm about to do!" It turns out that this is a key idea in this middle portion of Isaiah, remembering. You find far more references to it in those 16 chapters than in either the preceding 39 or the following 10. In the middle section of Isaiah, the prophecies given with the exiles in mind, this matters. And it is not just what the Israelites remember or not remember that matters. Isaiah is also concerned with what God chooses not to remember. In verse 43:25 God promises not to remember their sins, in 44:21 they are encourage to remember that God will not forget them.

So in our reading today, God enjoins the people held in captivity *not* to remember what was, just as God will not remember their sins. What God has been for them is called to remembrance, but then they are called to look ahead to the new thing that God is doing. While I'd like not to get too preachy here, I think I can safely say that I have not seen in my 70 years so many people looking back to another time that is somehow idealized. A time that was made unsustainable by human sin and that has passed into an idealized memory. While we struggle with the consequences now of that sin, I don't think it's a mistake to see in God's word here a call to us in our day to look forward to the new thing that is being done, however unsettling it may be to do so.

## Second Reading

I would really encourage you to read the whole of the Letter to the Philippians if you have the time. It doesn't take long and in it you can really see and feel the genuine struggle of Paul as he languishes in the prison in Ephesus from which he writes. He

clings to joy even as he anticipates that he will die there, and he encourages the Philippians to rejoice in the face of their own challenges as well.

And here, in this week's reading we see Paul responding to some opposition. "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

Read alone, this bit might seem to come out of right field. (I know, the phrase is usually "out of left field" but right fielders always have the stronger arms and have to make longer throws to third base, so....) But it begins to make sense if you read the first chapter where Paul speaks of those who "preach Christ from envy and rivalry." He sets them over against those who preach the Gospel out of good will and love. It would seem that there are those in Philippi who make much of their Jewish standing and who preach the Gospel in a way that disparages Paul and his gentile mission.

And so we see Paul making clear that no one has more right to boast of his credentials than he does, while at the same time saying that credentials mean nothing to him only that he might attain Christ.

And here I think I see an echo of his relationship with the Corinthians, who have tended to live as though they HAD already attained Christ, attained perfection. Paul makes clear that, while he has set his heart upon attaining Christ he makes no pretense that he has already reached that goal, nor will he in this lifetime, not in its fullness. This approach to Paul's rhetorical strategy makes better sense of Paul's apparent uncertainty as to his status before God, "*if it is possible that I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*"

I have inserted my own translation of 3:11 there (in italics) because the translation from the ESV is absolutely awful. The reading you're likely to hear aloud on Sunday is fine, but since I was going to change the ESV words I went with something bit more awkward, but more literal. The ESV translators have chosen a way of reading "*ei pos,*" if possible, that has been suggested by a few scholars, but they do so only because they are uncomfortable with Paul's apparent lack of certitude. But it violates the very meaning of the words and is entirely out of keeping with the way the phrase is used elsewhere in the New Testament.

I discovered in my reading this week that this one phrase in Philippians has been the cause of a lot of academic speculation in years past. We can understand why, I think, given that it seems so out of character for Paul. Several possible reasons for this

expression have been offered. Perhaps Paul meant exactly the opposite of what his words say (the ESV solution), maybe he didn't mean that he wasn't sure if he'd attain to the resurrection of the dead, only that he wasn't sure how. He might be expressing his doubt of himself, not of God. One author, trying to make sense of it all, suggests that Paul's uncertainty is only concerned with his inclusion in the "special," first resurrection of the martyrs. I found that a stretch, but you can see how scholars have struggled with this.

I find it more helpful to read this phrase within the context of Paul's argument against those opponents in Philippi who seem to be expressing *too much* confidence in themselves. Paul often speaks from weakness when confronted by those who speak from their own unassailable strength. This "apparent tentativeness" (a description favored by some of those scholars) makes best sense (to me) as part of that pattern. He has greater authority to speak than that, but he counts it all as loss for the sake of Jesus Christ, he has greater certainty than they, but he even sacrifices that in his rhetoric so that Jesus Christ will shine forth, not his own confidence.

#### Gospel Text

First thing of note: Reading this in the ESV drew my eye to something that felt very different. When Jesus answers Judas he says, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial."

But in the NRSV, the one we'll read in church on Sunday it reads, "Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

The NRSV also includes a little footnote after "She bought it" that reads "The Greek does not include "She bought it."

I know those three words don't amount to much, but going back and looking at other translations I find that they too have often added words here and there to the Greek. Unlike the reading from Philippians above, the ESV here gives the plain sense of the Greek. It feels much stronger, as though Jesus sees Judas moving to take it away from her and He stops him cold.

And why? So that she might have it for the day of His burial.

The way the NRSV reads, Mary has also anticipated the day of Jesus' burial and bought this costly ointment for it. Perhaps she brings it out in anticipation, but there is no sense of that in the Greek.

Mary's devotion to Jesus is such that she bought this for Him. And Jesus would have her keep it for His burial. There isn't any suggestion here that this was her initial intention. And I only just noticed that our NRSV translators have misled me for lo these many years. Ugh.

But all this raises a question for me.

Where do I draw the line between the use of my resources for the poor and the use of them for lavish displays of love to Jesus? Does this justify the expenditure of vast sums to put gold gilt on everything in a church? That jar of nard cost a year's wages in Jesus' day. But then, she doesn't use it all at once.

Okay. Here's my take. It might make for some interesting discussion.

Clearly Jesus doesn't object to this display of love, even as costly as it is. But He also appears to protect the remainder of the jar for one very singular purpose, the anointing of His body in death. I am left to wonder if He might have asked that some of the remainder be used for the benefit of the poor had that not been the case. We will never know.

But as you and I will never have to deal with His death again, not in the physical way that Mary did, dealing with His dead body, does that suggest that we balance extravagant love against the needs of the poor? I think it does. Both have value. It seems entirely appropriate to go a little overboard in the expenditure of resources in our worship of Jesus. But I also think there's a point beyond which Jesus might say, "I love this, but please, spend the rest on My poor."