

Divergence on the Lectionary, Second Sunday of Easter, Year C

First Reading

Acts 5:27–32

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Revelation 1:4–8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 20:19–31

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (ESV)

Questions and Comments for Discussion

First Reading

For just a bit of context, before our reading for this Sunday, Peter and the apostles have been brought before the High Priest and the Saducees who, in a fit of rage, had them imprisoned. They are freed by an angel and instructed to go and teach in the Temple, which they do. Later, the High Priest and the council call for them to be brought before them, but they’re not in the prison, instead word has it they’re teaching in the Temple. Perplexed, the authorities send to have them brought from the Temple.

Then we get to this week’s reading. Interestingly, the High Priest doesn’t accuse Peter and the others of heresy, but of the intention “to bring this man’s blood upon us.” This would, I think, be a reference to Peter’s preaching, which included, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:23, ESV) This appears to be the most direct shift of

guilt for Jesus' death from the Roman Empire to the Jewish people I can think of in the Bible. "You, the Jews did it, you just did it by means of the Romans (lawless men)."

It would be easy to write this off as anti-semitism. Indeed, it has been interpreted to support anti-semitism for some time. Others would also see in it Luke's "pro-empire" stance. And yet in the context of the larger picture of Luke's overarching project, I would suggest something different.

You may recall that on the [Second Sunday in Lent](#) I made reference to a chiastic structure in Luke 13 that began with some hope for the city of Jerusalem (let the tree live for one more year) but ends with Jesus declaration that "Behold, your house is forsaken." In the midst of that chiasm we have illustrations of the hypocrisy of the Jewish *leadership* that results in the desolation of Jerusalem. This entire chiasm serves to illustrate Luke's view that it is not Judaism that caused the fall of the Temple that is now history to Luke's readers, but their leadership.

Keeping that in mind, this is not anti-semitism, but Luke's attempt to explain how the destruction of the Temple is *not* a judgement on Judaism as a whole, but on the High Priest and his cohort, for they accurately discern that Peter's preaching will bring the blood of Jesus "on us," not on the nation as a whole. This is much more in keeping with Luke's reverence for Jewish practice that is demonstrated through the Gospel and Acts.

Then we have in Peter's response a reference to Jesus being "hanged from a tree." Many of us have heard this phrase, but many also don't know why the Cross is sometimes referred to as a "tree." It is this: In Deuteronomy there is a commandment concerning the execution of a man guilty of a capital offense, and it refers to the one "hanged from a tree" as "cursed by God."

"And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance." (Deut. 21:22-23 ESV)

The first Jews understood Jesus' Crucifixion to be according to that command, as He took all our sins upon Himself. "God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." He took our curse upon Himself. That's why they sometimes refer to the Cross as a "tree."

So, I see two motivations among the Temple Authorities at work. 1) Jealousy. Remember. At this point Jesus and His followers are all good Jews. Following Jesus is just one among a variety of different strands of Judaism in its day. And people are going

over to the “other side” in “multitudes” according to Luke. Perhaps we can relate a little to that jealousy when we see a new megachurch pop up in town and so many of our members start to go there.

But then they’re also worried for themselves. They don’t understand that Jesus’ death was preordained and that His followers know that. I suppose they fear a mob will come and exact vengeance on them for killing an innocent man. Think about it. Many of the new followers of Jesus may have been those who cried out “Crucify him!” How likely are they to stand in judgment?

If you were to put yourself into this story from Acts, where would you fit?

Second Reading

Here we have the opening to probably the *most* confusing book in the Bible. (followed closely by the Song of Solomon?)

First point of confusion. No, it wasn’t written by the John who walked with Jesus. Neither was it written by the John who wrote the Gospel. (They’re not the same.) It is a third John whose vision on Patmos was considered worthy of inclusion in the Bible.

Next point of confusion. The Revelation to John is a specific form of literature known as “apocalypse.” Revelation, that’s really what apocalypse means, the *removing* of a *veil*, revelation. So it’s the Apocalypse of John. So an apocalypse isn’t, in the time this was written, a world ending event, it’s a revelation of the future. But not the distant future. When apocalypse is written, it is written for a specific audience about their immediate or nearly-immediate future. It’s purpose is to encourage beleaguered, oppressed people to carry on, to give them hope. It is *not* meant to warn people in some distant future about what to look for before the end of the world.

Apocalypse was a well known form of religious literature in the first century. There had been several apocalypses written between the time of the writing of the last books of the Hebrew Scriptures and the time of Jesus. I’ve read them all, though I don’t recall many of them now. The pattern was to write in the present about the immediate future but to write it so that the speaker of the apocalypse was a respected figure from Judaism’s past. This character would “foresee” the present person’s situation and then foretell the way that God would resolve it. One such respected person was Enoch, the man who walked so closely with God that he did not die, he was just taken to heaven.

During that “inter-testamental” period, at least one apocalypse was written and ascribed to him. There is one clear apocalypse in the book of Daniel which follows this pattern as

well, and Ezekiel has apocalyptic elements. John's apocalypse varies from that pattern in that it isn't ascribed to someone of the past. I think that this is in keeping with the fact that Jesus had also spoken apocalyptically (read Mark 13). Not someone from the distant past. But the Revelation to John still functions in the same way. The person perceives the reader/hearer's situation/oppression, and then describes what God is going to do about it.

Another thing about apocalypse. Because it's written to an oppressed people in a time when such a text would be extremely dangerous, it's written in code. That's why it has so much symbolic language in it, like beasts with seven horns (the seven hills of Rome, the empire, not the denomination) and such.

So... In today's reading we get the introduction to the first portion of the book, which comprises seven letters to seven churches. Not the apocalyptic material. And we read the return of Jesus in the clouds, and His declaration that He is the Alpha and the Omega. This is important. This is not the Jesus that Peter preached, the man who was hanged from a tree, and in whose name disease and demons must flee. To a people who are truly oppressed, a great and mighty savior is more encouraging, more comforting than a forgiver of sins. Not that Jesus is only one or the other, but in our times of trial, He seems to appear as the Savior we most need.

Gospel Text

Thomas gets a bum rap. For some reason generations of Christians have singled him out as the doubting one, when he is in fact no different from the rest of the remaining eleven. Look back at the text again.

Thomas says that he will only believe if he sees Jesus' hands and His feet, and puts his hand into His side.

What was the reaction of the disciples a week earlier? "Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. *Then* the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord." If you read that carefully you'll see that the disciples pretty much stood there with their mouths hanging open until Jesus showed them His hands and His side. Only then did they "rejoice when they saw the Lord."

So Thomas only asks for what the others were given. And what's so wrong with that? Why does he get singled out?

And my favorite bit about this story? That Jesus is so gracious that He gives Thomas exactly what he'd asked for. He doesn't condemn him. Yes He commends those who will come to faith without seeing what Thomas has seen, but He still gives Thomas what he needs.

It leads me to suggest that you and I are encouraged by this story to ask for what we need to walk in faith. What is the thing we're missing that others seem to have had that, if we had it, would make it easier to walk in faith as Thomas eventually did. Thomas, you know, traveled from the region of Palestine all the way to India to spread the Gospel. Most Christians in India and that area trace their lineage back to him.

What do we need to become Thomases?