

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Third Sunday of Easter, Year C

### First Reading

Acts 9:1–6 (7-20)

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

(The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”) (ESV)

### Second Reading

## Revelation 5:11–14

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing!”

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.  
(ESV)

## Gospel Text

### John 21:1–19

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon

Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

The story we have this week of the conversion of Paul is an interesting one. Luke actually includes this story in two other versions later in Acts (22:4-16, 26:12-18). Each of them differs from the others in small but significant ways. And then we have Paul's own recounting of those events in Galatians (1:11-24).

What is clear is that each of the tellings of Paul's conversion rely to some extent or another on the calls of major prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Luke uses phrases from the calls of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Even Paul makes some reference to Isaiah when in Galatians he speaks of the One who "set me apart before I was born." (Isaiah 49:5)

In an article on Paul's call and conversion, Dale Allison Jr. makes a convincing argument that the strongest parallel is to the call of Ezekiel. While there are several linguistic parallels in the Acts 26 version (to the call of Ezekiel in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures), there is another one in our reading for this week. In it, God says to Paul, "But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you

are to do.” In Ezekiel, God says, “Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you.”

From all of these parallels I am convinced that it is more accurate here to speak of Paul’s “call” rather than his “conversion.” “Conversion” speaks to me of a change of heart brought about through the ministrations of another human being. “Call” seems a more intimate interaction between God and an individual (or perhaps group).

Does this matter? I think it does. It sets Paul on equal footing with the Apostles, who were “called” by Jesus, the Son of God. They were not convinced by a human being as those were who heard Peter speak on Pentecost, or who heard Paul speak in the synagogues and in the houses of the cities he visited. It puts him in the first generation of believers, not the second. So I will, going forward, speak of Paul’s call. Not his conversion.

## Second Reading

Some passages of Scripture defy attempts to study them, at least on my part. This particular segment of Revelation is that way for me. These verses have been central to Christian worship from the first centuries of the life of the church, and the imagery simply makes my heart soar to the extent that my mind refuses to dwell on the “countercultural” function of the Lamb against the backdrop of the Roman Empire.

Instead, I would like to share something personal with you. Many of you who read these Divergences will know that I have a Narnia quote for almost everything. I grew up with those books, met Jesus in those books, met God in those books. I’ve read them all more times than I can remember. At the end of the third book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (if you read them in the order that Lewis wrote them), the Pevensie children and their cousin Eustace have come to the end of their myriad adventures and misadventures. They take leave of the valiant mouse Reepicheep, and walk on alone. I’m sorely tempted to summarize the rest for you, as these paragraphs (I almost called them verses.) are so precious to me. Were so precious even at the age of eight, when I first read them. This will get a bit long, but here is the close to *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. I wish you could hear it as I do in the voice of Sir Derek Jacobi, who narrates the audio book, which I’ve heard countless times. You’ll see why I share them in the context of this reading from Revelation.

No one in that boat doubted that they were seeing beyond the End of the World into Aslan’s country.

At that moment, with a crunch, the boat ran aground. The water was too shallow now for it. "This," said Reepicheep, "is where I go on alone."

They did not even try to stop him, for everything now felt as if it had been fated or had happened before. They helped him to lower his little coracle. Then he took off his sword ("I shall need it no more," he said) and flung it far away across the lilled sea. Where it fell it stood upright with the hilt above the surface. Then he bade them good-bye, trying to be sad for their sakes; but he was quivering with happiness. Lucy, for the first and last time, did what she had always wanted to do, taking him in her arms and caressing him. Then hastily he got into his coracle and took his paddle, and the current caught it and away he went, very black against the lilies. But no lilies grew on the wave; it was a smooth green slope. The coracle went more and more quickly, and beautifully it rushed up the wave's side. For one split second they saw its shape and Reepicheep's on the very top. Then it vanished, and since that moment no one can truly claim to have seen Reepicheep the Mouse. But my belief is that he came safe to Aslan's country and is alive there to this day.

As the sun rose the sight of those mountains outside the world faded away. The wave remained but there was only blue sky behind it.

The children got out of the boat and waded—not toward the wave but southward with the wall of water on their left. They could not have told you why they did this; it was their fate. And though they had felt—and been—very grown-up on the Dawn Treader, they now felt just the opposite and held hands as they waded through the lilies. They never felt tired. The water was warm and all the time it got shallower. At last they were on dry sand, and then on grass—a huge plain of very fine short grass, almost level with the Silver Sea and spreading in every direction without so much as a molehill.

And of course, as it always does in a perfectly flat place without trees, it looked as if the sky came down to meet the grass in front of them. But as they went on they got the strangest impression that here at last the sky did really come down and join the earth—a blue wall, very bright, but real and solid: more like glass than anything else. And soon they were quite sure of it. It was very near now.

But between them and the foot of the sky there was something so white on the green grass that even with their eagles' eyes they could hardly look at it. They came on and saw that it was a Lamb.

"Come and have breakfast," said the Lamb in its sweet milky voice.

Then they noticed for the first time that there was a fire lit on the grass and fish roasting on it. They sat down and ate the fish, hungry now for the first time for many days. And it was the most delicious food they had ever tasted.

“Please, Lamb,” said Lucy, “is this the way to Aslan’s country?”

“Not for you,” said the Lamb. “For you the door into Aslan’s country is from your own world.”

“What!” said Edmund. “Is there a way into Aslan’s country from our world too?”

“There is a way into my country from all the worlds,” said the Lamb; but as he spoke his snowy white flushed into tawny gold and his size changed and he was Aslan himself, towering above them and scattering light from his mane.

“Oh, Aslan,” said Lucy. “Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?”

“I shall be telling you all the time,” said Aslan. “But I will not tell you how long or short the way will be; only that it lies across a river. But do not fear that, for I am the great Bridge Builder. And now come; I will open the door in the sky and send you to your own land.”

“Please, Aslan,” said Lucy. “Before we go, will you tell us when we can come back to Narnia again? Please. And oh, do, do, do make it soon.”

“Dearest,” said Aslan very gently, “you and your brother will never come back to Narnia.”

“Oh, Aslan!!” said Edmund and Lucy both together in despairing voices.

“You are too old, children,” said Aslan, “and you must begin to come close to your own world now.”

“It isn’t Narnia, you know,” sobbed Lucy. “It’s you. We shan’t meet you there. And how can we live, never meeting you?”

“But you shall meet me, dear one,” said Aslan.

“Are—are you there too, Sir?” said Edmund.

“I am,” said Aslan. “But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.”

“And is Eustace never to come back here either?” said Lucy.

“Child,” said Aslan, “do you really need to know that? Come, I am opening the door in the sky.” Then all in one moment there was a rending of the blue wall (like a curtain being torn) and a terrible white light from beyond the sky, and the feel of Aslan’s mane and a Lion’s kiss on their foreheads and then—the back bedroom in Aunt Alberta’s home at Cambridge.

Only two more things need to be told. One is that Caspian and his men all came safely back to Ramandu’s Island. And the three lords woke from their sleep. Caspian married Ramandu’s daughter and they all reached Narnia in the end, and she became a great queen and the mother and grandmother of great kings. The other is that back in our own world everyone soon started saying how Eustace had improved, and how “You’d never know him for the same boy”: everyone except Aunt Alberta, who said he had become very commonplace and tiresome and it must have been the influence of those Pevensie children.

### Gospel Text

It seems likely to me that at some point you have heard someone preach on the difference between Jesus’ word for love in His dialogue with Peter (*agapao*) and Peter’s word in response (*phileo*). So, when Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” He uses *agapao* and Peter replies with *phileo*. In that preaching you probably heard someone say that there is a difference between the two. *Agapao* refers to a higher sort of love than *phileo*, which indicates a sort of “brotherly” love. I’m pretty sure that I’ve preached on this difference at some time, but it’s quite wrong. In recent decades scholarship has progressed from what I read in seminary and in my early years as a priest. The two words are semantically indistinguishable in Greek literature of the time and in their use in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments (that would mean the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures).

Still, this alternation between Jesus’ use of *agapao* and Peter’s use of *phileo* must mean something, right? It’s too clear, too obviously intentional. So why did John write this scene this way?

Some scholars of John have suggested that this is purely a matter of writing style. They can point to John’s preference for “stylistic variation” in his writing. But the most

convincing explanation I found this week comes to us from the pen of David Shepherd. In his article he points to John's way of creating narrative tension and meaning by alluding to one part of the Gospel from another part. In this instance, Jesus' use of *agapao* alludes to His use of the verb during His "Farewell Discourse" in chapters 13-17. There, Jesus describes the kind of love He will show to the disciples in His death, and the kind of self-sacrificial love he desires from them in return.

Peter, in chapter 18, demonstrates that he may understand what Jesus was talking about, but his refusal to be identified as a follower of Jesus shows us that he is not yet capable of acting on that understanding. In chapter 21, Jesus asks three times if Peter loves Him. Many have commented on this threefold asking as Jesus' means of restoring Peter by echoing Peter's threefold denials. This seems to be true, but John's repeated referrals to the *agapao* of the Farewell Discourse and Peter's recurring response with *phileo* suggest that Jesus' rehabilitation of Peter is of questionable success. This conclusion is reinforced when Jesus prophesies over Peter saying, "...Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you *where you do not want to go*." Peter's reluctance to follow in the self-sacrificing love that Jesus describes and desires appears to follow him right to his death. His future is at best ambivalent.

So, finally, yes, there is meaning and intention in the alternation of the two Greek words for love in our passage this week, but they do not come from intrinsic differences in their Greek meanings. They are truly interchangeable. But this meaning comes from John's use of *agapao* in earlier chapters and the way the use in chapter 21 alludes to that use.

I've probably done some disservice to David Shepherd's paper from the Journal of Biblical Literature, so if you'd like to read it, [here's a link!](#)