

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year C

First Reading

Acts 11:1–18

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” But Peter began and explained it to them in order: “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Revelation 21:1–6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 13:31–35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

I think it’s important, from a study perspective, to acknowledge that our reading from Acts for this Sunday is the culmination of a longer narrative that goes back to include chapter 10. The whole story of Peter’s visit with Cornelius and his family is, I think, central to Luke’s entire project alongside Paul’s call from chapter 9 (Third Sunday of Easter, Year C). In these two narratives Luke validates not only Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, but does so in a way that the beneficiaries of Paul’s ministry, Gentile converts, are deeply grounded in their relationship to the Jerusalem church.

In my reading for this week I came across a fascinating article that demonstrates the ways in which Luke’s particular telling of the events of chapters 10 and 11 conforms to certain Greco-Roman “myths of origin.” I’m not sure I’d recommend the article itself, as its frequent reference to “myth” is disturbing, but is useful inasmuch as it helps us hear what Luke has written with the ears of the people of his time and place. (I just deleted a lengthy paragraph critiquing the author’s methods and conclusions, stuff you probably don’t want to read.)

What emerges from both the article and the stories from chapters 9-11 is this, Luke understands what God has already done in his Gentile Christian community through the lens of origin stories he already knows. These stories begin with conflict that leads to

expulsion, the travel (whether physically or spiritually) to strange and unclean places, and divine intervention that creates new community with the previously unclean. (There's more to it, of course, but those seem to be the most important elements to me.)

What Luke has done in these chapters, though, is much more than myth creation. He has narrated the stories of Christian origin in a way that shows 1) Paul is not the initiator of the Gentile mission, God is, and 2) this occurs not even through Paul, but through Peter, the leader of the Jerusalem, the Jewish side of the church. But he doesn't stop there. If all Luke wanted to do was validate Gentile Christianity he could have stopped with Peter's visit to Cornelius and his family. Instead, Luke tells of Peter's questioning and positive reception in Jerusalem, tying Gentile Christianity forever to its Jewish origins.

I know that I haven't yet come to the third anniversary of the beginnings of the Divergences on the Lectionary, but it's only a week away. As I enter into my second trip through the Lectionary with you all, I am planning to add a "So What" segment to each Divergence, an attempt to link this study that I enjoy and share with something current and more closely related to our life in the world. I may be a week early doing this, but I cannot resist the desire to do so here.

Luke has a task, here. To link the Gentile Christianity he knows to the Jewish Christianity from which it springs. I believe he wants to bind them to one another, not just explain why something so seemingly new and strange is valid. I am no Luke, but I often feel like I'm about a similar project. I believe that God is creating a new Church that includes the formerly "unclean" in a way that echoes Peter's and Paul's mission to the Gentiles. The movement of the Episcopal Church that I know and love has been mirrored by several other "mainline" denominations and resisted by several others, so it is not something limited to my denomination by any means.

But I have experienced in my own church a tendency to cast off more of the "old" than Luke would have had the Gentile church do. There is a tendency to write off Scriptures that do not appear to agree with this new thing we're enjoying rather than wrestle with them. We cut ourselves off, not just from our Jewish roots, but from some parts of our Christian heritage. In the same way that Luke tells the story in a way that values its Jewish heritage, I believe that we who want to see the Gospel include whole swaths of people that Christianity had previously read Scripture so as to deem them unclean, need also to go back to Jerusalem and argue as Peter did that what is happening is from God.

That is a large part of why I write these Divergences each week. While Peter argues from his experience of the falling of Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, Paul argues from the very texts that his Jewish family cherishes. I guess I'm more akin to Paul, but my own

experience of the activity of the Holy Spirit (and the fact that I am deemed “unclean” by many more conservative Christians!) also means I see Peter’s side of that coin.

I believe that the day of a Christianity that views those outside it as “unclean” is passing in much the way that Jewish Christianity was passing in Luke’s day. It will take longer, as such a mistaken version of Christianity has found its way into the halls of secular power in a way that Judaism and Jewish Christianity has never done. But it will pass into something irrelevant to the Gospel. Perhaps it is because so much of Christianity has given itself over to the work of Empire that God is breathing into life a new movement. I don’t presume to know.

What I do think I know is this: The same Holy Spirit that Luke saw binding the Jesus movement to its Jewish origin and Gentile Christianity to its Jewish Christian origin binds us to our own origins. As Luke honors those origins and wrestles with them, I feel obliged to do the same and honor the Scriptures (all of them, not just those I like) that my forebears in the faith honored. Which is why these Divergences will continue for as long as I’m able to write them.

Second Reading

Our second text for this Sunday comes from the next to the last chapter of the entire Bible, and it sums up both the Jewish and the Christian ideas concerning God’s ultimate goals for humankind. In this vision we encounter not just a restored Creation, but a new one, a Creation that is devoid of the struggle that has characterized human existence from the first chapter of Genesis.

This struggle, and its absence are very neatly laid out for us in the first verse of our reading, “...and the sea was no more.” This phrase has puzzled scholars for some time, each adding their own suggestions for its meaning to John and to John’s readers. Is it a reference to the sea from which the beast arose earlier in the Apocalypse? Does it evoke the “sea of glass” from Revelation 4, which serves as a floor to the heavenly realms (and by extension, a roof over the earth, separating the two). Is its removal a removal of that barrier? Is it just a reference to the sea as a generally chaotic place?

It seems as though each of those suggestions has some value, and perhaps we do well to hold all of them as a part of this image, but the interpretation that appeals to me most is that here at the end of the Scriptures we have the other bookend. The sea, the deep, the chaos over which the Spirit of God moved in the first sentences of Genesis, the chaos against which humankind has striven for thousands of years, this sea is gone.

What follows in the remainder of chapters 21 and 22 is a vision of an entirely new creation, in which no evil thing exists against which to struggle. There are no tears because there is nothing to cause them. The heavenly Jerusalem descends from heaven, and God comes to dwell with God's people. (The sea of glass, the barrier is gone, too.) What always strikes me about this passage, this final vision, is that we are not all carried off to a new heaven (for even the old heaven with its sea of glass must be replaced), but instead God comes to dwell with us in a renewed earth. We do not go to be with God, God comes to be with us. God answers the call, "Maranatha," "O Lord, Come."

This is a God worthy of our worship.

Gospel Text

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Just two weeks ago we heard Jesus question John on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius, "Do you love me?" He asked, three times. Here in chapter 13, Jesus begins to set the stage for that conversation. It is unfortunate that we must consider these verses apart from their larger context, that of the first of two "Farewell Discourses" that comprise chapters 14-17 in John. This week's verses (plus vv. 36-38) belong to that first discourse and serve as an introduction to it.

Throughout both discourses the importance of the theme of love seems to defy overstatement. As Jesus prepares His disciples for His departure, His "glorification," He returns again and again to love in three contexts. Here at the outset He begins by giving a new commandment, love for one another. But this isn't just a command to love one another, it is a command to imitate His love for them. This love that Jesus has had for the disciples is then woven together with two other strands, the disciples' love for Jesus, and Jesus' love for the Father.

I have said elsewhere that I believe that John's Gospel is based on the memories of someone who walked with Jesus (the "Beloved Disciple") and that this grants us a view into the inner life of the community of those who followed Him that the other Gospels lack. This doesn't mean, however, that I think Lazarus (for that is whom I believe the Beloved Disciple to be) sat at table that night with Jesus and took notes or that the Fourth Evangelist transcribed such notes verbatim. If I consume Jesus' farewells in chapters 14-17 in one large swallow, I come away with a swirl of themes that must have been just as overwhelming for the disciples in those moments as it is for me. What I

believe John has done is weave those memories together, and the central strand of that woven cord is love.

There are other themes, of questioning, of misunderstanding, of departure and return, of comfort, and all of these speak to the situation of the community after Jesus' death and resurrection (and though it is not explicitly related in John, His ascension, another departure). But all these other themes hang like pennants from the unbreakable rampart that is love. In our reading for this Sunday we encounter the first mention of the steel core of John's Gospel. Everything that has happened to date and everything that will follow, both in Jesus' life and the lives of those who follow Him, all of this flows from love, hangs on love, results in love.

The disciple on whose memories John's Gospel depends carried that truth away from that last night with Jesus, and John has braided all the themes of this discourse around it.