

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

First Reading

Acts 9:36–43

Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, “Please come to us without delay.” So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner. (ESV)

Second Reading

Revelation 7:9–17

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

“Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;

the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 10:22–30 (31–39 added in italics to complete the discourse)

At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?” The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our text this week from Acts relates the story of Peter’s raising Tabitha/Dorcas from the dead. I could find no interesting article or paper on this pericope to open some new insights on it for me or for you, so you’ll have to make do with some of my observations.

The first would be that in this story, Luke goes to considerable lengths to demonstrate that through the Holy Spirit the Apostles are capable of many of the same miracles that Jesus performed. The only two that I can think of that are missing would be the multiplication of the loaves and fish and then walking on water.

This is a pattern throughout Luke-Acts that is part of the reason that I sometimes suggest that the Holy Spirit might be the most important “character” in Luke’s two-volume work. In the Gospel according to Luke, Holy Spirit fills the hearts and mouths of the people before Jesus’ birth and empowers Jesus’ ministry from the time of His Baptism. In Acts, Holy Spirit again fills the hearts and mouths of the Disciples at Pentecost, and following this baptism of wind and fire, empowers their several ministries.

Luke lacks the account of Lazarus being raised from the dead that we only have in John, but he gives us the report of Jesus raising the widow’s son in Luke 7. In Acts, Luke gives us the parallels. Here in chapter 9 we have the raising of Dorcas, but also in chapter 20 we have the story of Paul’s raising of Eutychus. (The young man who fell asleep on Paul and fell out the window. I’ve always thought that amusing, a warning against going on too long with a sermon!)

And the story of Eutychus brings me to the second observation I’d like to make concerning our reading for this week. Luke also is careful to paint the careers of Peter and Paul so that they are essentially parallel. Anything Peter can do, Paul can do likewise. This illustrates to me two things. First, it shows me further evidence that Luke wants to rehabilitate Paul among Jewish believers in Jesus, but also, because Peter’s career is given first, it also shows me Luke’s determination to say to Gentile believers, “The works of the Spirit you see among yourselves find their root in Jewish Christianity. You cannot cast it off.” I believe that Luke is *determined* to bridge the growing gap between Jewish and Gentile Christians of his time.

And that bridge? Holy Spirit.

The same Spirit is active among Jewish and Gentile believers. From the first chapter of Luke, John’s parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, are filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesy and sing God’s praises. From that beginning Holy Spirit hovers over the whole of the story of Luke and Acts, binding them together and animating them both.

I will add one other personal comment. In the same way that my own experience includes stories of miraculous healing through the power of the Holy Spirit, I know of others whose experience also includes the raising of the dead. I have not been present for such a miracle, but I know of those who have. These instances are rare in Scripture,

so it isn't surprising to me that they're rare in our day, too. But they do happen. I understand the desire to write these occurrences off. "They weren't really dead," is the thought that keeps creeping into my mind. But the witnesses to these things are too reliable for me to give those doubts much credit. It makes me uncomfortable too, to believe that God still empowers us to do such startling things, and yet I do.

Second Reading

We have had readings from The Revelation to John for the last two weeks, and we'll continue to hear Revelation read for a few more weeks, so I'd like to make a few general comments on the book. It must certainly be the most confusing book in the Bible, and we struggle to find any kind of scholarly consensus on how to study it.

I was asked by a friend a few years ago to teach an online course on Revelation. To be honest, I found the task daunting at best, terrifying at worst, so I admit to being a bit relieved when we couldn't stir up enough interest in the course to make it worthwhile. Still, in the early preparation I searched for a book, a commentary on this text that could serve as a touchstone for us, and I'd like to recommend it to anyone who struggles with John's peculiar visions and wants to read more about them.

N. T. Wright has written a verse-by-verse (or perhaps more accurately, a section-by-section) commentary on Revelation I can highly recommend. Its title, "Revelation for Everyone" tells you his approach, and he takes a truly reverent approach to this baffling book while interpreting it without falling into the absurdities of those who want to read it as a book of predictions for our day. This isn't to say that that he sees no meaning in it for our present time. Far from it. But he remains faithful to the task of reading a book written for a given set of circumstances within that context. What's more, his writing style is very approachable and his book is very affordable. It goes for about twenty dollars in paperback, and the e-book version is about fifteen. So if you want to study Revelation in more depth than we I can manage here, I'd recommend it.

If you have money to spare and want a more thoroughgoing and deeper commentary on Revelation, I'd recommend G. K. Beale's. His massive work (part of the New International Greek Testament Commentary series) is my favorite among those I've read any part of. It's expensive (over ninety dollars) but well worth the money. I perhaps most fond of his approach to the genre of Revelation. How we read the book is dependent in part on how we categorize its genre, and there is little or no scholarly consensus on that. Beale takes all this into account by giving credit to all three prevalent views. His "mixed approach" gives credit to Revelation's apocalyptic character, but also

the prophetic and epistolary elements. This seems the wisest course in dealing with John's singular book.

Now, to our reading from this week. Here I differ only slightly with N. T. Wright when he says of this passage that those to whom John is writing "are about to face a nightmare." I believe that they are already engulfed in this nightmare, and that this is one of the leading reasons for the writing of the bulk of Revelation. This is most in keeping with Revelation's apocalyptic viewpoint. However, I don't think the difference here is all that meaningful. As I noted above, prophecy figures large in John's vision, (so a slight future orientation works) and the real point of this passage is its reassurance that God has foreseen what is happening or will shortly happen, and that John's readers will be "rescued" from this tribulation. "Rescue" is how Wright prefers to translate the word we read as "salvation" in this text. When I first read that I was really comforted by that translation. It just fits the context so well.

Then we are given another heart pounding vision of the nature of this rescue that begins with "Therefore they are before the throne..." Small wonder we often read this text at one of the most difficult moments in our lives, as we gather to entrust to God someone dear to us who has died.

And as Wright notes, we do well to give attention to the breadth of this rescue, this "salvation." Following closely on the specific numbers of 12,000 from each tribe of Israel that will be saved comes the vision of a group that "no one could number." If ever we are tempted to place a limit on who is or isn't included in that group, this bids us be humble. God's salvation, God's rescue is more expansive, more inclusive than anyone can imagine, than anyone can number. Such is the nature of the Love that holds us.

Gospel Text

I suppose I should have known that John linked the Passover to Jesus' discourse on the "Bread of Life" (John 6), and that he similarly linked the Feast of Tabernacles to Jesus' teaching on "Living Water" (John 9). Those are widely recognized, but I didn't know about them. If I had, I might also have known that scholars have struggled for a good while trying to understand what links the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) to the teaching and dialogue that follows. (I really had to include the whole of the conversation between Jesus and His opponents to make sense of it all.)

Many theories have been put forth. Maybe John links Jesus with the Maccabees and their liberation of the Jewish people. (Hanukkah celebrates the Dedication of the Temple during the Maccabean revolt.) Maybe they want to stone Jesus because he blasphemed, and the Israelites remember too well the blasphemy of Antiochus IV,

whose claim of divinity was largely to blame for the Maccabean War. More appear to like the idea that Jesus reference to being “consecrated by the Father” (italic portion) echoes the reconsecration of the Temple after the Romans desecrated it.

Reading over these theories, they each seem to have something to say for themselves, but the article that summed them all up for me and offered a new approach makes the best sense. In His dialogue with His opponents Jesus highlights His “works,” His miracles, as a sign of the authenticity of His claims. The event that sets Hanukkah apart as worthy of observation is the celebration of “miracles.” There is even an additional thanksgiving “for the miracles” inserted into the central set of blessings for Jewish worship during this feast. Later texts referring to Hanukkah argue that this non-Scriptural feast is worthy of observation precisely because of the miracles, most particularly the miracle of the oil that did not run out during the eight days of the rededication.

Reading only the portion assigned for Sunday morning may be (?) fine for liturgical use, but for any study of that text, the whole of it needs to be in view. When we take it all into account, this passage takes on wonderful overtones. I’m not quite convinced that more than one of these theories is part of the correct answer, but I’m glad that the most recent suggestion was part of my reading. (Here’s a [LINK](#) to that article if you’d like to read it for yourself.)