

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

First Reading

Acts 16:16–34

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. (ESV)

Second Reading

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 (The omitted verses are restored here in italics.)

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.

Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 17:20–26

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me.

I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Although this is not the point I’d like to dwell on for this reading, I just can’t avoid pointing to Paul’s “great annoyance” with the woman with the spirit of divination. While I find this a little amusing, this is a time when I find that I prefer the older, Authorized Version (“King James”) translation of “grieved.” Being “greatly annoyed” is just too trivial an expression, at least in today’s use of the word “annoyed.” It fails to take into account the other meanings of the word, found in other contexts (mostly extra-biblical). The other two ways this word “having been greatly annoyed” (it’s all one word in Greek) could be translate are 1) to exert oneself, to strive and 2) to manage with pains, to accomplish with great labor. (Strong’s)

While it is understandable, given Paul’s somewhat irascible nature, to write his subsequent actions off to mere “annoyance” I don’t think is an accurate characterization. It fails to take into account the connotations of endurance and pain that the word carries. He has tolerated this woman’s proclamations for some time, and yes, it causes him pain to do so.

We might ask why, given that what she’s saying seems rather complimentary. Paul clearly does not want that sort of attention. It is not his way of doing things. He always begins in a city with the places of Jewish prayer, and then, when he has exhausted that possibility, he goes out to the Gentiles. He doesn’t (with the exception of one notable failure in Athens in the next chapter) go out onto a street corner and begin proclaiming Jesus.

But apart from the attention Paul would probably rather not have, I think that the thing that really upsets him, causes him pain, is the source of the proclamation, that is, the spirit of divination. And that brings me to the subject I find more meaningful this week.

First of all, notice the way that Paul’s actions parallel those of Jesus. When the demonic spirits possessing some persons saw Jesus they began to proclaim Him, and Jesus’ first response was always to silence them before casting them out. Paul’s reaction is much the same, if considerably delayed. I find myself wondering about the delay. Why wait? And so far at least, my only answer is that he didn’t want to cause precisely the commotion that resulted from the woman’s deliverance from the spirit.

What I really want to talk about this week, with regard to this lesson though, is that this spirit of divination is a real thing, and a demonic one. And there are similar spirits of divination at work even to this day. I lived for many years in the realm of a fairly well known “medium” on Long Island. She is not to blame for the things she does. She has no awareness that the things she sees and hears are from a corrupt source. And they do in fact sometimes, perhaps often bring people great comfort. But that does not mean that the source of her insight is benign. I do not believe that it is. Neither is the source relied upon by any other spiritualist or fortune teller.

I don’t propose that we all set about picketing the entrances to such offices or places of divination as some have been known to do. I can’t find a single Biblical reference to or authorization for such a thing. Paul did not seek this woman out, and neither did anyone else I can find in the Bible. But avoid them. Their intent is not your welfare. The person operating in the power of that spirit may truly desire your welfare, but not the Spirit.

One of the things that I have learned through the years of study and work in the things of the Spirit is that one of the most insidious tools of the enemy to bring us low is to offer counterfeit versions of the gifts that God would have us enjoy. In this case, what is being counterfeited is the spirit of prophecy. It isn’t too hard to tell the difference between a spirit of divination and a spirit of prophecy. One brings glory and profit to the soothsayer and the other gives glory to Jesus and profits the receiver of the prophecy, not the giver.

I don’t think these spirits of divination (and if you think there aren’t a lot of them, read up on the Burning Man festival) are terribly dangerous, and I find that those who spend too much time preaching against them and protesting them are making too much of them in order to bring attention to themselves. After all, Paul would have done nothing about the one binding this woman if it hadn’t caused him pain over a long period of time.

Just avoid them. Don’t give the demonic any of your attention or time. It is unfortunate that large portions of the church have quenched the spirit of prophecy among them. It makes it much easier for the false spirits to operate without “competition.” If we took our prophetic ministries more seriously people would not turn so readily to the palm readers, tarot cards and mediums. As much as I’d like to see it, that isn’t likely to change any time soon, so in the mean time, please, just avoid those folks. They may not be too harmful, especially to begin with, but even at best they dull your hunger for the true things of God, the true spirit of prophecy.

At some point, I hope I'll have a chance to write more about the place of prophecy in the life and work of the church, because it pains me to see how we've turned away from such a wonderful gift, but I've gone on long enough for today.

Second Lesson

Last week I wrote about the way that we can read the words concerning those who will not be found in the City of God in a way that speaks to the wonder and holiness of God, and how certain acts just won't be found there because things that corrupt just cannot exist alongside the Goodness and Presence of God. It was a way to read it without turning those passages into a "who's in and who's out" catalogue.

This week is a bit more challenging in that regard, I have to admit!

If I could, I'd just focus your attention on the invitation, "The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price."

That's more or less what our lectionary choosers wanted to do, but I really regret their decision just to omit the parts that make us uncomfortable. So I put them back in, with italics, so that you can tell what you'll hear Sunday from what is actually in the Bible.

The first part they left out is, "Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."

Okay, I can't get around it. This is an inside/outside passage. But I'd like you to notice a couple of things. First - All those people who are listed as being "outside" the City are there. Outside the City. Not in some lake of fire or eternal torment. Hmmm. Second - Remember last week, the description of the city? "Her gates will never be shut." They aren't shut out. They're standing out there of their own accord.

This reminds me of a phrase I've heard a few times. "I'd rather reign in hell than serve in heaven." (Hell, in this case, seems to be standing outside the City.) For me, this is an indication of the Goodness of God. That is, even in this moment of His victory He permits us choice. Those of us who are so attached to our false gods and false sources of security and comfort that we can't or won't let go aren't dragged kicking and screaming into the Kingdom, no matter how much God might want that. And He never shuts the door on us. That invitation, "Come," keeps ringing from the battlements, drawing us in. Will everyone eventually say yes? I don't know. But my suspicion is that a love such as this will be awfully hard to resist over the course of eternity.

Then we have this second part that was also omitted for Sunday. “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”

What can I take away from this passage?

First, the author is aware that other Christian texts have been added to or altered. There really isn't any reason for adding these sentences otherwise.

Second, this is another of those places where I think it's imperative to recognize the two different levels of revelation present to us in the Bible.

Some of you reading this will recognize what I'm talking about from earlier “divergences,” but many won't, so those of you you know what I mean, skip down some.

Here's the way I approach Scripture. I believe in the inspiration of the text, all of it. Not all of it as it's been translated, but as it has come down to us through the process of canonization. I believe that every word there is a word God wants there. But that doesn't mean that every word reveals truth about God. I believe that God uses the Scriptures to reveal Himself to us, and us to ourselves. That is to say, some things said about God, things that God is even quoted as saying, aren't true about God, but are true about us. They reveal the way we twist God or misunderstand God when He isn't viewed through the lens of His self-revelation in Jesus. Basically, if what you think you see about God in the Bible doesn't square with who Jesus was and what Jesus did, it isn't about God, it's about us and how we misunderstand God.

I go into a lot more detail about how I read the Bible and how I teach others to read the Bible in my pamphlet, “How to Read the Bible.” I'm going to upload that in PDF form and link to it here in case you think this might be worth reading more about it.

The way this applies to this week's reading then, is this. The threat of plagues is not in keeping with Jesus. So it falls into the “oops, I'm reading about myself here” category. And that's just as important as learning about God. It's important that we understand that when we're angry or frustrated we are likely to ascribe our wrath to God. Our wrath and the things we'd like to see happen to those who are messing with the faith.

It's what we do. We like to put God's authority behind what we want. And that's pretty scary. Conservatives do it when they want to enforce their version of “morality” and

Liberals do it when they want to compel their version of compassion. So we all do well to remain humble when we decide that God is mad about what we're mad about.

Okay, on to the

Gospel Text.

I sometimes wish, reading and re-reading this text, that Jesus had included a Venn diagram to make it easier to understand what He's saying.

It starts off with Jesus asking that we be one as:

The Father is in Jesus,
And Jesus in the Father,

So that we might be in them.

Okay, forget it. A Venn diagram would only make it worse.

I make light because trying to put into language the reality of what it means to live as resurrection people, the intimacy of what it means to be "in Christ," the glory that becomes ours because what is the Father's is given to the Son and we are in the Son. (Keeping in mind that God has been very clear about His glory being His goodness! Exodus 33:18-19), all of that defies language.

The point of all of this though is tucked away in a little phrase in the middle of this week's reading. "So that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." That's the end result of everything Jesus prays for. So that people might look at you and me and know that He really did come from God and that we are beloved of God as well.

And the result of that is that when the world knows that Jesus did come from God they will experience (know) the love of God that the Father has for the Son.

This isn't an assertion that God *only* loves those who believe that Jesus is from the Father, but rather the expression of a desire that everyone (the "world") might experience what it means to be loved as God loved/loves Jesus. And yes, that's dependent on believing that Jesus has come from God. Again, no, I'm not saying that only some people are "saved" but only some people believe that the Creator of Everything loves Creation so much that the Creator became a part of Creation in order to restore a broken relationship. And the world needs a lot more people like that.

Yes, I avoided Christian-specific language because I believe that it's possible to believe in the One I know as Jesus without calling Him that. I don't know exactly how, but I know that Jesus said He had sheep who are "not of this fold." I think that holds open a lot of possibilities that I can't even think of.

But unless I believe, know that my Creator has set into place a mechanism by which the They heal and restore all brokenness I see all around me by taking all that brokenness and even my own on Themselves, then I remain a prisoner to this shattered world.

And when I embrace the renewed life, the resurrection life that God has made possible through Jesus I become a part of that thing God is doing, I am in it, in Him, and He in me, and I touch others by my very being, and draw them to God as Jesus did when He was lifted up.

And so, you see, even when I try to avoid the difficult language of John 17 to talk about John 17, it gets just as hard to write, or read.