

Divergence on the Lectionary - The Feast of Pentecost, Year C

First Reading

Genesis 11:1–9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth. (ESV)

Or,

Acts 2:1–21

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one

another, “What does this mean?” But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.
And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall
be saved.’ (ESV)

Second Reading

Acts 2:1-21 (see above)

Or,

Romans 8:14–17 (if Acts is the first)

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.
(ESV)

Gospel Text

John 14:8-17, (25-27)

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

(“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.

“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.) (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading (Genesis)

When I first wrote this, three years ago, I began by saying, “This will be my first mention of the work of Rene Girard called mimetic theory.” Since then I’ve used Girard regularly to give clarity to one text or another. I strongly recommend that anyone who would like to better understand the rise in violence we see all around us read Girard or the work of those who have followed after him. In very short, Girard shows how human violence is rooted in our imitation of one another’s desires and the rivalry that ensues. This rivalry builds until it threatens to destroy the social grouping, upon which moment the group turns its mimetic rage on an individual, a scapegoat, killing the innocent victim, and venting that rage. Myriad social structures and norms then flow from that first murder that I won’t try to get into here, but you’ll see more of Girard if you continue to read these Divergences.

One of the social structures that flows from the initial murder is language. You can read about the relationship between the scapegoat mechanism and language in Eric Gans’ book, “The Origin of Language.”

At the beginning of today’s reading from Genesis, all the people of the world speak one tongue. Everyone understands everyone else. I liken that to the pre-lingual state of humans before the first murder of the scapegoat. The social grouping still communicated, but there was no socially determined understanding that a certain sound connected to a certain thing or action. But in the wake of that first murder humans begin to determine that only one phoneme could be used to represent a given thing or action and common understanding starts to break down. We stop relying on our ability to hear each other on a level that isn’t dependent on specific sounds. Each group develops its own set of sounds or words for the world around them and the ability to communicate with the group on the other side of the mountain is lost because words have taken the place of pre-lingual communication.

In our reading for this week Genesis attempts to describe this fall from the grace of pre-lingual communication. It doesn’t seem to me to be coincidence that this story comes only a chapter or two after the Great Flood. (God cleanses the earth of unrestrained mimetic violence.) Babel is founded by Nimrod, the grandson of Noah. It is worth remembering that the first city ever founded in the Bible is founded by Cain, the first mimetic murderer, and Babel is the first city founded by Nimrod, the first “mighty man” among Noah’s descendents. The potential for violence from such a city is enormous.

I can infer from the origin of multiple languages then that there is hidden in this story the beginnings also of mimetic scapegoating. (Human culture always masks its sacrifices

behind myth.) And that, while the scapegoating itself is abhorrent to God, it does prevent a descent into the antediluvian chaos of a couple of chapters previous.

Now. All of this is very well and good, but if it doesn't connect to the Gospel in some way, I've just wasted a lot of ink, or.. pixels in this case. And of course, it does. I find in this text evidence of the first murders of the scapegoats, cloaked in myth, which result in the birth of the first languages, and the loss of the grace of common communication.

And in our next reading from Acts, we see it all reversed.

Reading from Acts (can be first or second)

I really do wish I could refer you to a website I helped build a number of years ago called "Preaching Peace." In it my friend Michael Hardin and I set about to interpret the Gospel texts of all three lectionary years through the lens of mimetic theory. Michael did the huge bulk of the writing. (He's frighteningly brilliant.) I edited, did the HTML work, and added a "So what?" portion to each week's writings. But there I could have directed you to several better synopses of Girard's work than I can put into this weekly missive.

But here we are, and in Acts we're confronted with one of the consequences of the murder of the last biblical scapegoat. (Caiaphas even said as much, that it would be better for one man to die than the whole nation.) And in the wake of that murder of Jesus the loss of the ability to understand one another without reference to specific sounds, specific languages, that loss is reversed.

Look closely at the text. It does not say that the disciples spoke all those different languages. No indeed, Peter is clear that some have heard and thought the disciples drunk. But each person **hears** the Gospel proclaimed in his or her own language. The Holy Spirit is moving in such a way that the babbling (reference to Babel intended) of the disciples in tongues is understood by all, each in their own way. The ability to communicate beyond the need for language is restored. Only temporarily, unfortunately, but restored nonetheless.

Second Reading (Romans, if Acts is first)

In this week's reading from Romans we find another of the immeasurably valuable consequences of the great reversal that happened on the Cross. We are restored to our status as children of God. Yes, I know it says "sons" but just as the people at Pentecost were able to hear beyond the actual sounds filling their ears, so also we are enabled to hear beyond gender-specific words.

The point is this. We are restored to the relationship with God that Adam enjoyed in the Garden, before the fall. Recall that in Luke's genealogy of Jesus, he goes all the way back to "Adam, the son of God." So also Paul writes of the "first Adam" and Jesus, "the last Adam." And we, being in Jesus, enjoy that same status before God, as God's children. So much of the anguish and violence I see around me seems to be the result of people acting as orphans, without the security of knowing they have an "Abba" who hears their cries. And I do not speak of the poor and the oppressed here. No, I speak of those who have accrued power and wealth to themselves as a substitute for God's parental embrace.

Now before I go on to our Gospel text to re-emphasize that parental relationship, I'd like to pick a bone with our translators. (I know.. again...)

We have this unfortunate phrase at the end of our reading from Romans today that I'd like to retranslate for you. It is this unfortunate conditional bit, "...provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."

We need only translate differently a couple of conjunctions in the Greek to change this from a requirement to a re-statement of what Paul has already been saying. He doesn't mean that we "must" suffer "in order to" be glorified with Christ. That is an abandonment of the Gospel and has poisoned the preaching of the Gospel for ages upon ages. Think of those Christians who have intentionally brought themselves pain in order to fulfill this verse. And then think what God would say about that. And yet, because we are so conditioned to see God as one who requires something first and only gives after His demands are met, the translators have chosen two translations for two simple conjunctions that completely corrupt the Gospel intention. I don't mean to speak ill of the translators, only to show how very hard it is to read the biblical text without our human blinders on.

Okay, so how can we retranslate those conjunctions.

First.. "*eiper*". Translated "provided." It can also mean "since." And Paul uses it to mean "since" elsewhere in Romans, so it's not a usage foreign to him.

Second, "*hina*". Translated "in order that." This is a common translation of *hina* and one that makes sense if you mistranslate *eiper* above. But if you get *eiper* right, then *hina* can also mean "with the result that."

So let's read that whole sentence now with a translation that is in keeping with Paul's understanding of grace.

“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, since we suffer with him with the result that we may also be glorified with him.”

Yes, Paul sees a link between suffering and glorification, but this isn't an injunction to suffer in order to get something. As in Paul's other reference to this link in 2 Timothy, it is assumed that those who follow Christ under the boot of the Roman empire suffer for their faith. And this is an assertion that this suffering isn't without value to God. Not that God desires it, but that God honors it, bestows glory through it.

In a world in which Christianity has been dominant for centuries, the assumption that we suffer for our faith can be lost on us. Perhaps this is why translators have misread this phrase for so long. But we must read Paul contextually, and in a way that remains consistent. And “provided” just doesn't do that.

The Gospel Text

In this week's text I have the justification for reading the Bible as I do. Basically, if it doesn't fit with what I see of Jesus in the Bible, it isn't about God. It's about me. It's a description of how I twist God to fit my own skewed understanding or desires when I am not viewing Him as revealed in Jesus. And that justification? “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.’” Basically, Jesus is saying to Philip, “There's nothing more to God than you have seen in me. There's nothing more to show you.”

Or as the author of Hebrews writes: “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the *exact imprint of his nature*, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” (Hebrews 1:3, ESV)

Or as the author of Colossians writes: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” (Colossians 1:15, ESV) and, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” (Colossians 1:19, ESV)

So, if there's any doubt about the way I read the Bible, I have the Bible to back me up.