

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 15, Year C

**First Reading**

Isaiah 5:1–7 (track one)

Let me sing for my beloved  
    my love song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
    on a very fertile hill.  
He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
    and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
    and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
and he looked for it to yield grapes,  
    but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem  
    and men of Judah,  
judge between me and my vineyard.  
What more was there to do for my vineyard,  
    that I have not done in it?  
When I looked for it to yield grapes,  
    why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I will tell you  
    what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge,  
    and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall,  
    and it shall be trampled down.  
I will make it a waste;  
    it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
    and briars and thorns shall grow up;  
I will also command the clouds  
    that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts

is the house of Israel,  
and the men of Judah  
are his pleasant planting;  
and he looked for justice,  
but behold, bloodshed;  
for righteousness,  
but behold, an outcry! (ESV)

Jeremiah 23:23–29 (track two)

“Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD. I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal? Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? (ESV)

## **Second Reading**

Hebrews 11:29–12:2

By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of

whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (ESV)

## **Gospel Text**

Luke 12:49–56

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (ESV)

## **Comments and Questions for Discussion**

### **First Reading (Isaiah)**

Last week I talked about the way that Isaiah sees a direct link between wrong worship, most especially idolatry, and injustice. The first is the ineluctable cause of the second. There simply is no injustice in a community that truly knows and worships the God of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And that is reflected in the last few lines of our reading from chapter five of Isaiah today.

and he looked for justice,  
but behold, bloodshed;  
for righteousness,  
but behold, an outcry!

In the absence of righteousness, that is, right relationship with God, there is an outcry. If you didn't exhaust the topic of righteousness and its link to justice last week, there is ample cause to continue the conversation this week.

But this week I'm caught up by the prophet's voice.

A first thing to notice is that it changes. It begins as a song sung by Isaiah to/for the beloved, the Lord. Then it shifts as the prophet identifies with God and begins to speak in the first person. I don't think that's just coincidence. Isaiah begins with worship. He sings a love song to the Lord. I don't know how many of you are familiar with contemporary worship music, but a good number of the songs sound like love songs. Some people find that off-putting, but it is very biblical. One has only to read the Song of Solomon to understand that such a romantic way of being in relationship to God is one that God also desires.

So Isaiah begins with his worship, his love song, and then transitions into prophecy, spoken in the first person. I understand this as a natural progression. Worship that moves us into intimacy with God like that between lovers gives us insight into the very heart of God, and enables us to speak on God's behalf. Not many of us will be moved to speak for God in the first person. I myself would have to overcome a lot of scruples before doing that, but sufficient intimacy with God will lead us to do strange and wonderful things, so who knows.

But the world is full of "outcry," and aches to hear God speak. As the prophet says in a later chapter, "my people go into exile for lack of knowledge." And the knowledge of which Isaiah speaks is not knowledge of the rules, but knowledge, intimate knowledge of the One who would be to them as the Beloved.

But before we can know the heart of the Beloved and speak to the world in the Beloved's voice, we need first to find rest in His presence and to come to know His heart.

**Jeremiah text**

“Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.”

We are accustomed to thinking of God as “near” and to thinking of this as a good thing. And yet here God seems to declare, “No! I am a God far away!” Why is that?

In an article I read in preparation for this week’s studies (link at the end) I found that a survey of God’s “nearness” and “distance” in the Hebrew Scriptures tell us that God’s distance is associated with God’s omniscience, God’s power. When God draws near, it is usually to deal with the people’s unrighteousness or their enemies.

So while we are accustomed to thinking of having God close at hand as a desirable thing, in this context that is not a good thing. It is the false prophets who are treating God as someone who is “near” and, for want of a better phrase, “take God for granted.” They speak “Peace! Peace!” when there is no peace. (Elsewhere in Jeremiah.) I am reminded of the old adage, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Such is the brand of prophecy that speaks against Jeremiah and his warnings.

I cannot help thinking, as I read this passage with new eyes, of certain “prophets” in the present day who are taken in by a certain political figure and his glaringly unjust use of power. Familiarity has most certainly bred contempt.

## **Second Reading**

“...who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

For the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame.

I could spend hours meditating on that phrase. The impact of that phrase once nearly knocked me off my feet as I stood celebrating the Eucharist, but I’ll get to that in a moment.

What was the joy that made the Cross, and the shame that went with it, something that Jesus could not just endure, but despise?

You. And me. Restored to fellowship with the One He called “Father.” And all those saints the author of Hebrews named in the paragraphs just above this brief passage.

That was the joy that sustained Him as he faced His last hours. The knowledge that He was bringing us back into His Father's embrace.

I was once made intimately aware of the love and joy that Jesus felt for His disciples as he spoke to them of His Body and Blood given for the world, and not just for them, but for humanity as a whole. As I spoke the Words of Institution words at the altar that joy came crashing in on me and it was all I could do to continue, not to crumble in awe and wonder. Perhaps most every other priest experiences that regularly during the celebration of the Eucharist, but I hadn't. And I haven't been that gobsmailed since. But I know now, and I never fail to remember.

And I meditate on His joy and the reason for it, and I am changed. Perhaps only in small increments, but I'm changed, from glory to glory. And I learn, bit by bit, to despise my own trials.

## **Gospel Text**

I know that my perspective is sorely limited, but in my lifetime I have never known a country more divided, a world more divided. And it isn't just because some are believers and some are not, or some have the right theology and some have the wrong.

As I read this all my learning about the work of Rene Girard and his theories concerning human culture and mimetic rivalry come back to me. I won't overburden this weekly piece by trying to cram Girard's work into a few paragraphs, but I'll say this.

Girard understands that human culture is built upon a false peace, a peace that is founded upon the violent death of the scapegoat. And even though as Rene began his work he described himself as an agnostic, he also found that the Passion Narrative and the sacrifice of Jesus was the undoing of the human system of surrogate sacrifice and that it destabilized, and continues to destabilize any (every) culture built on this victimage mechanism. On this realization alone, Rene became a Christian.

I hate the violence and the violent rhetoric that feeds it that are a part of the world that I'm leaving to my children and my grandchildren. And yet I also believe that the only peace that is crumbling is a false peace, one that Jesus came to destroy. Any real peace, any peace built on the Goodness and Mercy of God can withstand this shaking. And there is plenty of that around if we look for it.

But He didn't come to bring the peace people were hoping for. He came to pull down the false peace we'd built for ourselves at the cost of our scapegoats and to make room for His Peace to flourish.

Even after 2000+ years, I think we still have a long way to go.

If you'd like to read more about Girard and mimetic theory I recommend one of his last books, "I See Satan Fall Like Lightning." As my friend Michael Hardin (who was himself a friend of Girard's) used to describe it, "It's like Rene wrote a primer on himself toward the end of his life."

Here's a link to the book - [I See Satan Fall Like Lightning](#)

If you want something even shorter I wrote a paper a long time ago about Worship and Desire, and at the end I put an appendix Mimetic Theory In A Nutshell. I'll link to the [PDF HERE](#), and you can skip to the end of the paper to get a free and utterly inadequate summary of Girard's work. I hope it'll stir you to want to buy the book!