

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 17, Year C

First Reading

Jeremiah 2:4–13 (track one)

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the clans of the house of Israel.
Thus says the LORD:

“What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?
They did not say, ‘Where is the LORD
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that none passes through,
where no man dwells?’

And I brought you into a plentiful land
to enjoy its fruits and its good things.
But when you came in, you defiled my land
and made my heritage an abomination.
The priests did not say, ‘Where is the LORD?’
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the shepherds transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal
and went after things that do not profit.

“Therefore I still contend with you,
declares the LORD,
and with your children’s children I will contend.
For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see,
or send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has been such a thing.
Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for that which does not profit.
Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
be shocked, be utterly desolate,

declares the LORD,
for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water. (ESV)

The Book of Sirach 10:12-18 (track two)

- 12 The beginning of pride is stubbornness
in withdrawing the heart from one's Maker.
- 13 For sin is a reservoir of insolence,
a source which runs over with vice;
Because of it God sends unheard-of afflictions
and strikes people with utter ruin.
- 14 God overturns the thrones of the proud
and enthrones the lowly in their place.
- 15 God plucks up the roots of the proud,
and plants the lowly in their place.
- 16 The Lord lays waste the lands of the nations,
and destroys them to the very foundations of the earth.
- 17 He removes them from the earth, destroying them,
erasing their memory from the world.
- 18 Insolence does not befit mortals,
nor impudent anger those born of women.

Or,

Proverbs 25:6-7

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence
or stand in the place of the great,
for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say,

"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?"

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 14:1, 7-14

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.

And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to

them, “Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?” And they could not reply to these things.

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading (Jeremiah, track one)

Oh, how a reading can turn on a word! The entire tone of this reading from Jeremiah changes completely on the translation of one word, “*arib*.” Translate it one way and we hear God standing apart and pointing the finger, “I accuse!”

“Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord,
and I accuse your children's children.” (Jer. 2:9, NRSV)

This is the unfortunate translation we’re given from the NRSV for Sunday morning.

But translate it the way that the NRSV translates that word and its root, “*ryb*”, almost everywhere else and God is engaged. Angry, perhaps, definitely heartbroken, but not standing apart and accusing. God is “contending” with His people. He is quarreling, arguing, but engaged.

The difference may seem small on the surface, but it is enormous beneath. In the NRSV reading I stand alone in the docks, God pointing me out to the entire courtroom, “This! This is the one who wronged me!” In the ESV translation God wrestles with me. Of

course the outcome is never in doubt, but the point is that God is present to me, in touch with me. I am not abandoned.

I wish that I could come up with a defense of the NRSV's translation that made sense given the heart of the God that I know, but I can't. It feels as though it has superimposed a certain modern stridency on the text. It would be easier to defend if even they had translated the word the word as "accuse" all the time. But they don't. They read into the text the God they know. And I do the same. I know I do, and I suppose that the translators of the ESV do the same. But at least the ESV is consistent.

So, which God do you know? The one who accuses, or the one who contends?

Sirach (track two) (or Proverbs)

The Book of Sirach, or the Wisdom of Ben Sira, is an apocryphal book that dates from the early second century, BCE. The book itself fits neatly into the genre known as "wisdom literature" that would include Proverbs. At first glance, the Sirach text and the Proverbs text seem to have something in common. Pride and the taking of a seat that you think you deserve do seem to be similar faults.

Certainly, the Proverbs text (two whole verses!) was chosen because it echoes so closely Jesus' teaching from Luke. We might well assume that Jesus had this verse from Proverbs in mind as he spoke. But the text from Sirach fits less well if we read it as part of the whole. Sirach is concerned with pride, yes. The parallels between verses 12 and 13 make it apparent that for the author, sin and pride go hand in hand. Indeed, in Augustine's vulgate translation, "Pride is the beginning of every sin."

But the context for Sirach needs to be considered. Taking the book as a whole, we find that the author's chief purpose in writing it is to counter certain teachings that suggest that God has not made wisdom available to everyone, but has limited it to the few. He goes so far as to suggest that Adam and Eve knew right from wrong before they ever took the fruit of the tree.

So, then, the pride of which Sirach speaks is the pride of choosing one's own estimation of what is good instead of God's. This is the pride that is the equivalent of sin. Not choosing the wrong seat at a table. For Sirach, we always have the ability to choose the good, even without the guidance of the Law. Pride is what lead us to act on a good that we have chosen, rather than the one made known to us by God.

Second Reading

I usually include the omitted portions of our readings in the Divergences. Often it's just because I think it's unwise of us to leave aside the bits of Scripture that our lectionary choosers think we don't need or want to hear. But sometimes they really do create a better context for the parts we actually will hear on Sunday. This is one of those times.

I put the excluded parts of the reading from Hebrews in italics to set it apart from the Sunday lection. I wish that we were reading it because it really does make much better sense of the rest of the text.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews has given us a whole list of commended behaviors. Show hospitality, remember those who suffer as though you suffered as well, honor marriage, keep free from love of money, do good, share what you have. And at the end he concludes with "for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." I think that it is fair to think that all these behaviors are among those "sacrifices" to which he refers. But to list them as pleasing sacrifices without the context created by the omitted portion risks having us think of these behaviors as those that make *us* somehow more pleasing to God.

Because that's what the letter makes reference to in the part we won't hear on Sunday. Those who offer up the blood of animals in the "tent" or tabernacle in order to be cleansed themselves. To be made acceptable themselves. That contrast is important.

You are pleasing to God. Already. Jesus made you that way by virtue of His blood. I don't offer up these sacrifices (the list) *in order to* be pleasing to God, but *because* He has made me that way through the gift of His Son.

I think the church has unintentionally (at least I hope it was unintentional) forgotten this because it's so much easier to control people's behavior if their own standing before God is at risk. But that's not the Gospel, and it's not what our reading from Hebrews is about.

What do you catch yourself doing (even now) to make yourself more acceptable to God?

Gospel Text

I included the omitted portion of this week's Gospel as well, though it doesn't change the context of the reading much. It does help make sense of why Luke tells us that they were "watching him carefully," though. That's more about Sabbath observance, not the dining part.

But both our sections on dining etiquette really revolve around one question. “What do you think the Lord of the Feast thinks about you?” If you aren’t sure, you scramble for the best seats at the table. This reminds me sadly of the behavior of some folks when Sara and I were attending the Voice of the Apostles in Orlando. We would arrive early and position ourselves near the doors, but when they opened people ran helter-skelter to get to the best seats in the front. We just wouldn’t do it, and it really put Sara off. I think it upset the man leading the worship band, too. One morning as the people scurried to the front seats he began playing that quick piano riff that you can probably remember from the old Keystone Cops movies.

If you’re sure about your place in the heart of the Lord of the Feast you don’t scramble to find a place that others will recognize as one of honor.

Similarly, if you know your place in the heart of the Lord of the Feast, you know the pleasure They take from your care for the powerless and poor. You don’t just know it intellectually, you feel it. You feel Their pleasure. I think that some of the difficulty we may have with the idea of being “repaid at the resurrection of the just” is that we still want to cram the workings of God into a human time-line. As though this repayment is still off in the future. While that is true in a human sense, in the Spirit, all things are present, and when we know the Lord of the Feast we also know in the present what the “future” holds as though it were already here. Even I can’t seem to talk about it without becoming sequential. It isn’t “as though” it were here. It is.

Personally, I want to know the Lord of the Feast even better than I do now. It will make living in these challenging times so much easier.