

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 18, Year C

First Reading

Jeremiah 18:1–18 (track one)

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’

“But they say, ‘That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.’

“Therefore thus says the LORD:
Ask among the nations,
 Who has heard the like of this?
The virgin Israel
 has done a very horrible thing.
Does the snow of Lebanon leave
 the crags of Sirion?
Do the mountain waters run dry,
 the cold flowing streams?
But my people have forgotten me;
 they make offerings to false gods;
they made them stumble in their ways,
 in the ancient roads,
and to walk into side roads,

not the highway,
making their land a horror,
a thing to be hissed at forever.
Everyone who passes by it is horrified
and shakes his head.
Like the east wind I will scatter them
before the enemy.
I will show them my back, not my face,
in the day of their calamity.”

Then they said, “Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words.” (ESV)

Deuteronomy 30:15–20 (track two)

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Philemon 1–21

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 14:25–33

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or

what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading (Jeremiah text)

It's not easy, being a prophet. Jeremiah sees the disaster that lies before Judah. He sees the cause. He even sees the cure. If only the people of Judah would turn from their wickedness and live! If only they would stop running after false gods, listening to prophets of gods that don't even exist.

Even though he has seen that they will not turn, they will not relent, he speaks that word of hope to them. If they will but allow it, God will reshape the vessel that has gone bad on the wheel and make something new and wonderful from the very same clay.

But they will not hear.

And so Jeremiah is called upon to prophesy destruction. The fruit of the people's own evil will be all they'll be given to eat. They will stumble in the ways into which their false gods have led them and their land shall become a horror.

Hearing these words, "they" (I sometimes wonder who "they" are.) begin to plot against him, for they have a false confidence in the future, and Jeremiah's words shake that confidence. And so Pashur, a false prophet, puts Jeremiah in the stocks and has him beaten.

It's not easy being a prophet.

Just after Jeremiah is released from the stocks (that happens in chapter 20) we hear his well known lament.

Jeremiah 20:7–9

O LORD, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;
you are stronger than I,

and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
everyone mocks me.
For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot. (ESV)

He'd just as soon keep his visions to himself, thank you very much. People do not want to hear what he has to say.

It's no easier to be a prophetic voice today. In fact, I'd suggest that it's even more difficult than it was in Jeremiah's day.

Why? Because you and I are confronted by two sets of misguided prophets, not just one, and they dominate the conversation. They're so loud, so strident, that it's hard to be heard.

There are the prophets who deny that there's anything wrong, and any call to repentance is met with a cry like that of those who plotted against Jeremiah, "The law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet." There is no climate change, the chasm between rich and poor isn't destabilizing the whole world's economy. God is not grieved by any of this, because this is what "freedom" looks like.

Then there are the prophets who haven't ever learned to move beyond Jeremiah. Who prophesy as if Jesus had never lived, or died, or been raised. As if there were no new creation, no hope.

Some of them are Christians. They prophesy destruction unless the individual, country, the world, turns to Jesus. They still see the action preceding the result, as Jeremiah did. They aren't able yet to read the Bible, all of it, through the lens of Jesus. And the "gospel" they preach is so devoid of Good News that it can no more change the direction of a country than I can the direction of a freight train while standing on the tracks.

But in our day, it seems to me that most of the prophets of doom in the Western world I know have abandoned Christianity as the powerless thing it has become. Not the Gospel. Christianity. And they can see the disaster that hovers on the horizon, they can see the injustice and instability that give us little hope of averting it. They know it grieves the heart of God, even though much of Christianity has poisoned that Name for them. They know that poisoning the earth and starving the poor are wrong, and they cry out like Jeremiah did. “Your land will soon become a horror!”

And very little, if anything, changes because they too preach a “gospel” that puts action before results.

And why not? That’s how things work, right?

No, and that’s why being a prophetic voice in this day is even harder than it was for Jeremiah.

Because the Kingdom comes before the action. But no one wants to hear that. Everyone thinks that preaching impending doom will change behavior, and that will change the outcome. We keep hanging on to that non-Gospel way of thinking, that we have to change first, then we get blessed. We. Just. Won’t. Let. Go.

The only prophetic voice that is true to the Gospel is one that’s likely to get you thrown in the stocks. Either by the folks who want to keep their heads in the sand or by the folks who think that the real Gospel is just too weak to get done what needs to get done.

The real prophet in this day and age speaks to the individual, the church, the nation, and says, “This is what the Lord has done. This is who He made you. This is how beautiful you are.” And the beauty the prophet sees begins to resonate in the heart of the individual, the church, the nation, and they begin to become what they already are in the Kingdom.

No finger pointing. No hand-wringing. Just Gospel. Just faith. Just hope. Just love.

Deuteronomy text

It is tempting just to allow this week’s text from Deuteronomy 30 to speak for itself. In it God promises blessings to those who abide by the statutes given through Moses and disaster for those who do not. This is a theme that recurs throughout the latter chapters of the book. But is there something we can glean from this motif?

In trying to find an answer to that question I found myself in a quandary. It seemed the more I studied, the less I understood. As a result, what I have to offer you is less conclusion than process.

Most of what I did acquire this week concerning this passage is its relationship to the larger project of the Book of Deuteronomy as a whole. To understand the passage better, I found that I needed to grasp some idea as to why it was written, by whom, and for what purpose. That proved a slippery goal.

Deuteronomy (gosh, but that word is hard to type) is almost certainly *not* a collection of laws given directly by Moses. It seems to be an expansion on the Covenant Code found in Exodus, a much earlier text. It is also not a unified text. It has three basic sections, an introductory section in which Moses exhorts the people, a central section of law, and a closing section recounting the blessings and woes that will accompany compliance and non-compliance.

The close relationship between the phrasing and vocabularies of Deuteronomy and the deuteronomic history (Samuel-Kings) suggest that they shared authorship, whether by an individual or a school. That at least some of the material comes from exilic or post-exilic Judah seems beyond question.

Deuteronomy is also unique in that it is almost all written in the first person, in the form of address or (as some have called them) three distinct “sermons” from Moses to the people. This form has historical precedents in the writings of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. In all these cases, law was given additional authority by placing it in first person accounts allegedly given by highly respected historical authorities. That we have something similar here seems highly likely to me.

What we have is a core of legal proscriptions “discovered” during the reforms of Hezekiah, a core that shows some dependence on earlier documents from the Priestly source, a core on which later authors/editors elaborated. It is worth noting that some of the blessings and curses found in later chapters follow fairly precisely blessings and curses found in earlier Assyrian covenantal documents. The author(s) must have had some familiarity with them.

All of this places this week’s text in an exilic/post-exilic setting, for which the author is trying to account. The fall of the Davidic dynasty requires explanation as well as a reason for hope in the future. The theme of promise and consequence seems to offer both to a people left bereft by the Babylonian conquest, and I think our text for this week supports that goal well.

Second Reading

Well, I seem to have written a bit of a sermon on that last one. Sorry about that.

Now we get Philemon. I'm beginning to wish this week's lessons weren't all at once. The Gospel's no lay-up, either.

Philemon makes us squirm because in it, Paul appears to affirm the institution of slavery. Whether or not the institution operated in exactly the same way as the abomination that manifested itself in the first century of the history of the United States, it was still slavery. One person belonging to another. Property.

And Paul doesn't attack the institution itself, but rather pleads with the slave's (Onesimus') owner, (Philemon) that he be sent back to him (Paul) rather than kept in his slave-state. Our translators have chosen to translate the Greek word "*doulos*" as 'bond-servant' rather than slave, I presume because they opt to see this form of servitude as on that Onesimus may have entered voluntarily, and perhaps temporarily. There certainly were such persons, and the same word, *doulos*, might have been used for that as well.

But it's still quite clear that Onesimus has no freedom to leave this relationship of his own accord. It is slavery.

It can't be argued that within this letter, Paul fails to confront the institution of slavery. Even so, Paul is very clear that Onesimus is sent back, not as slave, but as brother. This doesn't mean that Onesimus' absence from Philemon changed his status, only that the time apart has given Philemon the opportunity to see that his standing toward Onesimus, and Onesimus' toward him has changed because of their standing in Christ.

We simply can't square the criticism of Paul that he was tolerant of slavery with Galatians 3:28. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

We might like Paul to be the crusader we want him to be, but he's not. Paul writes to specific people, specific churches, about specific things. He doesn't attack the injustice of empire, but he preaches a Kingdom that looks like family. He doesn't attack slavery, he simply says we're brothers and sisters.

Yes, there are other letters written in Paul's name, that advise slaves to remain in the state in which they were called. It's likely Paul didn't write those, but whether he did or not is a discussion for another week. What we have before us this week is Paul's gentle

but inescapable assertion that our status before one another is changed to that of siblings in Christ. There's no room in that relationship for slavery.

Gospel Text

“So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”

Thanks very much, Jesus.

And what's this about hating my parents? My siblings? Just about everyone I love?

Really?

Isn't this the same Savior who told me that His yoke is easy, and His burden light?

Yes, it is. And so I'm invited to make sense of this, and the way I do that is by applying the same Gospel principles to what Jesus is teaching here as I would to any other teaching in the Bible. Kingdom and Kingdom identity come first, action follows. I do not “renounce everything I have” to enter into Kingdom reality, to become His disciple. But when I accept the truth of the Gospel, step into my new identity, every old way of being in relationship crumbles. It isn't that I “hate” my mother or my father, but I become their brother or sister as children of the one Father. I don't struggle under the burden of my own cross in order to step through the gates of the Kingdom, but once through I find that I joyfully take on the work that is mine in bringing that same joy to others.

If that's what Jesus meant then, why didn't He just say it that way?

I'm not certain, but I have an answer that works for me.

The Gospel principle that Kingdom comes first and actions second only makes sense in the light of the Cross. That isn't to say that this principle isn't to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is. But it's much harder to identify without the Cross as your guidepost. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. That's Kingdom principle. And stepping into that Kingdom is like stepping through Alice's looking glass. Everything changes, everything old is lost in being made new. So yes, I renounce every old way of being in choosing to step through the gateway of the Cross into the Kingdom of God. But I don't lose a thing.