

Divergence on the Lectionary, Proper 21, Year C

First Reading

Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6-15 (track one)

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was shut up in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah. For Zedekiah king of Judah had imprisoned him,

saying, “Why do you prophesy and say, ‘Thus says the LORD: Behold, I am giving this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall capture it; Zedekiah king of Judah shall not escape out of the hand of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye. And he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I visit him, declares the LORD. Though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed’?”

Jeremiah said, “The word of the LORD came to me: Behold, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle will come to you and say, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.’ Then Hanamel my cousin came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.’ Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

“And I bought the field at Anathoth from Hanamel my cousin, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions and the open copy. And I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch the son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of Hanamel my cousin, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. I charged Baruch in their presence, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.’ (ESV)

Amos 6:1a, 4–7 (track two omitted verses in italics)

“Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,
and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria,
the notable men of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel comes!
Pass over to Calneh, and see,
and from there go to Hamath the great;
then go down to Gath of the Philistines.
Are you better than these kingdoms?
Or is their territory greater than your territory,
O you who put far away the day of disaster
and bring near the seat of violence?

“Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory
and stretch themselves out on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock
and calves from the midst of the stall,
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp
and like David invent for themselves instruments of music,
who drink wine in bowls
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first of those who go into exile,
and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away.”

(ESV)

Second Reading

1 Timothy 6:6–19

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal

life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 16:19–31

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

(Jeremiah text)

(I do think that the excluded verses from this week's text from Jeremiah, those in italics, are worth reading, as they create important context for Jeremiah's reply.)

Sometimes it isn't clear when one receives a word from the Lord. Even for someone as intimate with God as Jeremiah is, sometimes it's hard to tell that a word is truly from God. It is one thing to trust God, and quite another for us to trust our hearing. And it's worthwhile, especially when the word we think we hear aligns too closely with our own wishes, to look for confirmation. This is why, when we really do think we've heard from the Lord, it is important to test that word in the ears of others, to look for confirmation.

There may be times that we're called to walk alone, as Jeremiah often had to do, to bring the word that we've been given. But even Jeremiah wasn't sure this time, and he didn't accept as sure the word that he'd heard about buying Hanamel's field at Anathoth. It wasn't until Hanamel arrived at Jeremiah's place of imprisonment (the court of the guard) and said precisely the words that the Lord had told Jeremiah he would say that the prophet accepted what he'd heard as from the Lord.

I don't think it's unimportant that Jeremiah disclosed this hesitance of his. It demonstrates to us that even the ear most keenly attuned to the voice of God is subject to error, and that Jeremiah knew his own limitation and approached his prophetic task with humility. In this case, the act that he first heard himself instructed to undertake made little sense, and perhaps offered false hope. After having prophesied the fall of Judah and Jerusalem over and over again, there comes the command to invest in its future. Perhaps the people would think that the Lord had repented of His plan to overthrow Judah. Or perhaps Jeremiah wondered if it were only his own wishful thinking that he heard. Whatever the reason, he did not give full credence to the word until Hanamel offered him the land.

There is a deep need for a prophetic voice to be heard above the clamor in these days, and some have rushed in to try to fill it, but it will be important for us to listen for the voices that show humility like Jeremiah's.

(Amos Reading)

Our passage from Amos this week excoriates the wealthy and powerful for their indifference to the suffering of the people of the Northern Kingdom. But an article I

found while studying for this week's lessons showed me that there are some images in verse six that aren't obvious in our current translation.

It seems that there are some "medical" allusions in the latter half of the verse that the translation misses. Here is what we have in both the NRSV and the ESV, "but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" The word translated here as "ruin" has a much more embodied sort of meaning. It refers to a "wound" not something general like "ruin." Ruin connotes a more political kind of injury, but the term speaks to a more physical pain. So the article by Eugene McGarry would suggest a reading more like "and are not grieved by the wound of Jacob."

This then causes us to read the first couplet of this verse differently.

"who drink wine in bowls
and anoint themselves with the finest oils..."

The medical use of wine and oil to treat wounds would have been widely known to those who hear Amos' prophecy, so his criticism is of those who use these medical treatments for their own pleasure while the people lie wounded. This seems a much sharper criticism than just suggesting that the wealthy lay about while the nation collapses. Imagine a modern nation whose wealthy consume its healthcare resources for pleasure, say, cosmetic surgery, while the poorest of its people cannot afford insulin. Oh, wait. We don't have to imagine that, do we?

Second Reading

I have two thoughts to offer on our reading this week from 1 Timothy. The first is the way that the verse about money and the root of evil has been translated. I'm really hoping that we'll all go away from this lectionary text with this translation firmly in mind, as it is *entirely* different from the misquotation we hear so often in the culture, "Money is the root of all evil." First of all, it is "the *love* of money" about which the author speaks. Second, the translators have chosen to soften the absolute sense of "all" by translating it as "all sorts of" or "all kinds of." While that may be a bit of a stretch for *panton*, it works. And third, they translated the anarthrous (without an article) "root" as "a root" rather than "the root," the former being preferred. There's no "the" in the Greek. No article. And to translate "root" as the one and only root without the article for "the" (*he*) makes it much too absolute. So the author doesn't mean to say that money is the root of all evil, only that the love of it is one of the roots of all sorts of evil. Not the only one. Or even the main one.

The other thought I have is really just a question. What is the “good confession” that Timothy confessed before many witnesses that Jesus also made before Pilate? Only in John do we have Jesus saying more to Pilate than “You have said so,” to the question “Are you the king of the Jews?”

And of course in John Jesus says a good bit more. “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then a verse or two later, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

I think that the confession of which the author speaks is simply, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” (Eph. 2:11) I just find it interesting that 1 Timothy equates the human confession of Jesus’ lordship with Jesus’ words to Pilate, calling them both “the good confession.”

Gospel Text

Ah, the parable of Lazarus and Dives, or Lazarus and the Rich Man. (I didn’t know where “Dives” [pronounced Die-vees] came from until I looked it up today. It’s from the Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, and it’s a Latin word for “rich man.”)

I wonder how many sermons will be preached this week on some variation of “economic justice.” It’s an easy mistake to make, a snare carefully laid by Jesus in His parable, and one that has captured many a preacher. Especially today, where the gap between the unimaginably wealthy and the poor and working poor grows by the day, by the hour, it is tempting to try to make some kind of warning out of this.

And there is a warning, but it not to the wealthy. It is to those of us who would try to convince them to change their ways by pointing to the empty tomb. The warning is simple. If they are not convinced to behave differently with their wealth by the compassion for the poor that is woven throughout “Moses and the Prophets,” then Jesus’ resurrection won’t change them.

The point of this parable is all in the punchline. “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

I was a “supply priest” in a parish once where they had a rare thing. A huge crucifix hanging on the wall behind the altar. In most churches in my experience, the cross

behind the altar is an empty one, if there's one at all. I was deeply grateful for the opportunity to point to that crucifix several times in my sermon.

I was once criticized for wearing a crucifix around my neck. This lovely woman, in whose church I'd been invited to sing for their annual revival told me, "You shouldn't wear that! You should wear one like this. (Holding up her empty cross necklace.) We worship a Risen Savior!"

And these days, I do wear a plain cross without the Body of Jesus on it, but not for that reason. Mostly because it's a gift my wife gave me more than 45 years ago.

The thing is, that well-intentioned woman's empty cross and the empty tomb are the powerless proclamation that Jesus warned us about in this parable. We do not preach Christ, raised from the dead, we preach Christ crucified. (1 Cor. 1:23) That is the Gospel that still has the power to change the heart of the misguided "rich man." A God who suffered and died in order to restore us to Himself. Jesus said it when he said that when he was "lifted up" (meaning on the Cross) He would draw the whole world to Himself.

Jesus tells us a long story about a rich man and a poor man, one that's designed to get us thinking about how we might scare each other into behaving better by warning of eternal fire. And then he says that someone coming back from the dead with that warning won't accomplish a thing. Wham. That's a punchline that lives up to the word "punch." It's a little discouraging that He knew that we'd be tempted to pervert the Gospel into a morality tale with a terrifying ending.