

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 28, Year C

First Reading

Isaiah 65:17–25 (track one)

“For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy,
and her people to be a gladness.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem
and be glad in my people;
no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping
and the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not fill out his days,
for the young man shall die a hundred years old,
and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain
or bear children for calamity,
for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD,
and their descendants with them.
Before they call I will answer;
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall graze together;
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
and dust shall be the serpent’s food.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain,”
says the LORD. (ESV)

Malachi 4:1–2a (track two) (4:2b-3 added in italics)

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. *You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.* (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 21:5–19

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."

Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading (Isaiah reading)

This passage from Isaiah 65 is surely one of the two or three most well known of any from that book. Most scholars treat this as part of what is known as “Trito” or “Third Isaiah.” A school of prophets perhaps founded by Isaiah, or built on his reputation is said to have spoken to the Israelites who have returned from captivity in Babylon to find the nation and the city Jerusalem in ruins. The chief aim of Third Isaiah seems to be to lift up a people hard pressed by despair.

As I have said in other Divergences, I don’t hold with the division of Isaiah into three parts. While it isn’t difficult to see that the prophecies of Isaiah do seem to be aimed at different ages of the people of Judah in different ages (First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, spoken to the people facing The Assyrians and calling them to repentance to avoid catastrophe, Second Isaiah, chapters 40-54, spoken to the people in captivity in Babylon and encouraging them, and Third Isaiah, chapters 55-66, spoken to the returning exiles) I am prepared to believe that God can have spoken through the one prophet to the people in all three of these circumstances. Having personally experienced prophecy that spoke to me of both my immediate and much more removed futures at the same time, it just isn’t hard for me to see a prophet as great as Isaiah doing the same for the people of Judah over a much longer span of time. In the end, though, I don’t think that it makes too much difference which way you read it. In both cases God inspires the prophet, or the prophet’s heirs to speak some of the most powerful visions of the future into being.

And that is what is happening, perhaps most especially in this passage from chapter 65. As God spoke Creation into being in Genesis, God's word spoken through the prophet to a broken and despairing people creates "new heavens and a new earth," where

The wolf and the lamb shall graze together;
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
and dust shall be the serpent's food.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain.

It is so important that we all grasp the power of these words. Not the power of the imagery, though that alone is enough to bring tears to my eyes, but the power of the words, the words that create. The Word that Creates. God doesn't just predict something here, this "future" remains future for you and me, but it is as solid as was the sun when God said, "Let there be light." We no longer wish for such a future, we place our hope in it, and hope does not disappoint. We stand on it. God's future is as present to Him as is our present, and because we are in Christ it is just as real to us. Time collapses and we feel our hearts burn with the presence of a heavens and earth made new.

I would rather not go off down this rabbit trail, but I don't seem to be able to stop myself. I just can't help drawing your attention to the the fact that in the present-future of which Isaiah speaks, both heavens and earth are made new. Not just earth is redeemed. This calls to mind John's vision in Revelation 21, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." (Revelation 21:1, ESV) In both cases it is clear that the corruption of the created order that results from human sin has also affected "the heavens" or "heaven," and that both are made new. This is reinforced in Revelation because in the new heaven the "sea" is no more. That because for the desert people of the Middle East in that era, the sea was a place of chaos. The "sea of glass" in heaven in Revelation is a sign that it too has been contaminated by the effects of our sin.

I know this is something of a distraction after the glories of Isaiah 65, but I would really like you to grasp the enormity of this. The Bible's understanding of the power to affect Creation granted to us by the Almighty extends even to His dwelling place. When we sought to go our own way and live as though we were God (the real sin of Genesis) the fissures that choice caused in Creation extended even to "the heavens." But the same power in a redeemed people allows us to co-labor with God to bring into being the new world, both heaven and earth. It has always been God's intent to share the joy of creation with us, and we are no less heirs of that hope than were Adam and Eve. I hope you'll sit with that thought for a while.

Malachi text (track two)

Malachi concludes what we call the “Old Testament.” The book also forms the conclusion of that collection of the lesser prophets that was called in its time the “Book of the Twelve.” I have written in other Divergences (3 Epiphany B and 4 Advent C) a little about this collection of prophetic writings. The editor who assembled them all shaped each book in small ways to support the larger vision of the restoration of Israel, Northern and Southern Kingdoms reunited. If we were to read just a few more verses on this Sunday, we’d find this editor’s work in verses 4-6: “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

Our reading this week, though, does not come from the hand of the editor of the Book of the Twelve. Neither does it come to us from the prophet himself, but instead is an addition by the Levitical priest who collected the sayings of Malachi and edited them together. While there are some differences among scholars about just which verses to assign to which source, it seems that most agree that we can divide the book into two larger sections, one a series of condemnations of the (Levitical) priesthood and the second aimed at the people in general. The article I found most helpful asserted that a later editor brought these two collections together and added to them here and there. Our text this week comes as this editor’s conclusion to the book.

I added the rest of verse 2 and verses 3 and 4 to make clearer the real context of the verse we Christians have laid hold of for centuries. “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.” This image of the sun rising (and we have quite intentionally misspelled “sun” as “Son”) is only a part of the editor’s vision of those disenfranchised, faithful persons rising up to trample the unrighteous. Not a very healing image at all.

As a whole, Malachi appears to have been given by a prophet from the Levitical priesthood in the post-exilic period, late enough that the Temple has been rebuilt. The prophet decries the corruption of the priesthood, but declares that this priesthood will be cleansed. He also condemns the faithlessness of the people, but lays much of the responsibility for that at the feet of the priests. Finally, an editor has brought these prophecies together to help encourage a sub-group of the Levites who have been cast out for their support of the prophet’s program of reformation. It is this small group that our text envisions rising up under the “sun of righteousness” and trampling the unfaithful.

Second Reading

And that thought, that we are co-laborers with God in bringing into being a New Creation, that thought segues beautifully into what I'd like to point out about our reading from 2 Thessalonians. Paul's primary concern in this letter seems to me to be how we live in anticipation of the Lord's imminent return. For Paul, early in his ministry and among those to whom he ministered, this return was just around the corner. For some that was a matter of consternation, for others joy, and apparently for some, it was also a reason to become idle, to do nothing because it didn't matter. Jesus was coming back so there was no need to exert oneself.

Let's say for a moment that this wasn't just a bunch of slackers using the Day of the Lord's Return as an excuse to laze about. Let's say that the people of whom Paul speaks are really just so overwhelmed by the idea of Jesus' return that they can't find any point in doing anything. They feel so tiny in the face of an event so enormous that it has become hard to stir arms and legs to do much of anything. Let's give them that benefit of the doubt.

Paul's words then aren't just aimed at lazy people, but people who do not grasp what I was trying to talk about at the conclusion of my comments on the first reading. People who do not understand that we are intended to be a part of bringing that new Creation into being.

This speaks volumes to me about Christians who believe that God is coming and will soon right all wrongs and restore the earth, and so we have no responsibility to care for the earth or its people. Our job, if we have one at all (it seems to me from what they say and do), is to hasten Armageddon, to bring about the End so that God will do all of that. To such Christians I would say that Paul's admonition against idleness means that God has entrusted that work to us, redeemed by the Blood of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are God's agents in this process of making all things new, and we are called to stand apart from those who would be idle. I think that Paul's concern about laziness among Christians is no less pertinent today than it was in the time of the Thessalonians.

I would add a little more here. There are those who may not take their part in the restoration of Creation out of something other than laziness. Many, perhaps most of those who sit and watch as peoples and landscapes are depredated do so out of despair, out of the fact that they can see no solution, no part they can play. I would encourage you to be gentle with such folks, perhaps with yourself if this is where you are. Such despair is the work of the enemy, and it is long in the making. Too many Christians

never learned how powerful we are in Jesus, in the Spirit. We never learned the authority that was returned to us through Jesus' death on the Cross, and so we never taught it to our children, or their children.

We can do better, but I think it does no good to point fingers. We have the Gospel. We have Isaiah 65. We have the power and the gifts of the Spirit, and we have the ability to set hearts on fire, hearts that seem ground into the dust. We don't step on those hearts in judgment, we lift them up and set them aright and point them to their destinies. The task is great, the laborers few, so a large part of our task is to raise up other empowered workers, and that will require patience and gentleness.

Gospel Text

I have been putting off writing about this week's passage from Luke, perhaps from laziness. That is to say, to write what I want to write about this reading is going to take a lot of background information, and I kind of dread getting into it. Still, it's a topic dear to my heart (Girard and mimetic theory) so I can't just skip it.

That's because this text from Luke is not related in any way to "apocalypse." It is treated by many scholars as a parallel to Mark 13, which is often described as Mark's "little apocalypse" and so these words from Luke suffer the same taint.

I wrote last week, as part of my discussion about the use of Daniel for All Saints, about the nature and purpose of the literary genre known as apocalypse. In a nutshell, apocalypse is written about the present moment of oppression being experienced by the writer and their readers, usually placed on the lips of someone past and trustworthy who goes on, after describing the present moment with remarkable clarity, to predict God's imminent intervention so as to encourage the people being oppressed. I know. That's a big nutshell. You might want to re-read that a couple times.

To call Mark 13 or this passage "apocalypse" is to say that it was written by someone later than Jesus, perhaps Mark himself, to describe a period of oppression, perhaps the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple, and to set that as a sign of Jesus' imminent return. This is not what's happening here.

This is not apocalypse. To my mind, it is not even prophecy. Yes, Jesus predicts events in the future, but that doesn't make it prophecy. That's like saying "Oh, that building is going to fall down soon," when you see one canting thirty degrees to one side or another and calling it prophecy. Jesus' warning of dire events to come are not prophecies of judgment, but descriptions of the effect that His life, crucifixion and resurrection will

have on human society. He describes the breakdown of human society that His death will cause, well into the millenia to follow. And He cautions us not to mistake any of those events as signs of His imminent return or to be taken in by those who will claim to be a savior.

Yes. I said His death on the Cross, His Passion is the cause of societal breakdown. And that brings me to Rene Girard and mimetic theory. I just have to lay some groundwork, some foundation for what I've said.

This is what Wikipedia has to say about Girard, the first sentence in his entry:

René Noël Théophile Girard (25 December 1923 – 4 November 2015) was a French polymath, historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science whose work belongs to the tradition of philosophical anthropology.

I know, that doesn't tell you much. But Girard brought to light patterns of human interaction that lead to the violence on which most culture is based. He first took notice of it in his studies of literature, but then he found that it extended to anthropology, historical anthropology, and found applications in philosophy and psychology (among a number of other disciplines).

First and foremost he noted that human desire is imitative, mimetic. We learn what to desire by watching what others desire. You can see how this serves a certain survival need in infancy, for instance. We learn to value what others have and want the same. We also find that when others want what we have, it makes it seem more valuable to us.

This inevitably leads to resentment, when someone else has something I want, or when someone else wants what I have too much. This resentment then builds to what Girard describes as "mimetic rivalry." Unrestrained, mimetic rivalry grows into violence, and mimetic violence eventually threatens the very fabric of the societal unity in the war of "all against all." In the animal kingdom there is a natural brake on this rivalry and violence as one rival eventually submits to another, but in the human there is no such brake, so when the social unit is sufficiently threatened the group collectively selects and kills a "scapegoat," thereby venting all that wrath on one person and restoring peace. "Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." (John 11:50, ESV)

In the wake of this collective act the community cannot tolerate their complicity in it, and so "myth" is built up around the victim declaring their guilt and the necessity of the murder. At the same time, the death of said victim brings peace and so culture also deifies the scapegoat, leading to creation of religion and ritual. Religion is linked to

prohibition, prohibition of mimetic desire, “Thou shalt not covet,” and ritual re-enacts the death of the scapegoat on a regular, recurring basis so as to provide a reliable outlet for future mimetic violence. (Because prohibition doesn’t really work.)

Perhaps the most astonishing of Girard’s conclusions though, is that the Gospels, most especially the Passion Narratives, are the undoing of the structure of the murder of the scapegoat. All other myth declares the guilt of the innocent victim of the sacrifice. It is the only way in which the sacrifice can effectively relieve the community of its rage and its guilt. But the Passion Narratives proclaim time and again the victim’s innocence. The Gospels unmask our pattern of creating scapegoats and killing them for the sake of our own peace, rendering them less and less effective, leading to more and more unvented mimetic rivalry.

In his earlier writings Girard makes plain that he believes that the Gospel has so undermined our ability to believe in the scapegoat’s guilt that it will lead to the dissolution of much that we know as civil order.

And that brings me finally back to Jesus at last. His warnings of what was to come, what is to come, are not apocalyptic prophecies, just a description of the dissolution of civil order as a result of the propagation of the Gospel. He goes on to describe the animosity that those who propagate this Gospel will encounter. We even have that within the church as those who speak for the voiceless, the marginalized, the scapegoats, are demonized by others within the church who would prefer religion and order to Gospel truth.

I haven’t done the enormity of Rene Girard’s work even a penny’s worth of justice here, but perhaps I’ve stirred some curiosity. My friend Michael Hardin (himself a friend of Rene’s) has said that one of Girard’s last books, “I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,” seems like Girard writing a primer on himself, so that’s probably a good place to start. Here’s a link to that book on Amazon.

I could write another entire piece on the way that Jesus encourages us not to prepare, but to trust the Holy Spirit to give us words when we’re standing accused. But I won’t. Maybe in three years when this reading comes back around. Maybe I am lazy!

I would also like to say that as gloomy as this all sounds, there is an answer that leads us out of the downward spiral of mimetic scapegoating and violence. I wrote about that a long time ago in my paper, “Worship - The Redemption of Desire.” Here’s a link to that PDF. If you’re feeling depressed at the moment, it’s worth a read.

For a more easily printable version of this Divergence, please [CLICK HERE](#).