

Divergence on the Lectionary - Second Sunday after Christmas, All Years

First Reading

Jeremiah 31:7-14

For thus says the LORD:

“Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
‘O LORD, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.’

Behold, I will bring them from the north country
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.

With weeping they shall come,
and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back,
I will make them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble,
for I am a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

“Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;
say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’

For the LORD has ransomed Jacob
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall be like a watered garden,
and they shall languish no more.

Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy;
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance,
and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness,
declares the LORD.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a (omitted verses in italics)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe,

according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And

he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23 (omitted verses in italics)

Now when they (the Wise Men) had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

*“A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. (ESV)

Or,

Luke 2:41-52

Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group they went a day’s journey, but then they

began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.” And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (ESV)

Or,

Matthew 2:1–12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our text from Jeremiah for the Second Sunday after Christmas comes from the middle of what is known as his “Book of Consolations.” Jeremiah, a prophet of doom throughout his career as a prophet to faithless Judah, has these words of comfort for a people about to be dispossessed of the land and the Temple. It is thought that this Book of Consolations was written only shortly before the fall of Jerusalem.

What I found interesting as I studied this passage is the strange (almost) link between it and one of the (three!) Gospel alternatives for this Sunday. That is, if we'd gone only one more verse, we'd have heard the text that is quoted in Matthew 2, but omitted in our reading, concerning the death of the infants in Bethlehem and the surrounding region.

Thus says the LORD:
“A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping;
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for
because they are no more.”

It is interesting that Matthew appears to reshape the meaning of this lamentation completely. In Jeremiah, the sound of weeping is immediately silenced by the promise of return and restoration.

This isn't cited in Matthew, so at first glance it might appear to be a citation that refers only to the sorrow of the women of Ramah/Bethlehem. But keeping in mind the enormous place that Jeremiah had in the hearts and minds of first century Jewish believers, the subsequent verse would have been easily recalled. This suggests that Matthew, writing in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, intends to recall the prophetic command to "Keep your voice from weeping," because for the new generation of believers, Jewish believers in Jesus, "... there is a reward for your work," and "... they shall come back from the land of the enemy."

I've long been aware of Matthew's desire to portray Jesus as the promised "prophet like Moses." (Deut. 18:15) Only this week during my studies did I realize that Matthew also intends to show us how Jesus is also the heir to Jeremiah's place among the prophets. And so we have from the beginning of the Gospel, a firm link not just to Jeremiah's text, but to the promise of restoration to a people who had just lost their identity in the Temple.

This bit of Matthew is omitted in our reading for the Second Sunday after Christmas. Perhaps the story is too sad for a day among the Twelve Days of Christmas. Perhaps it is omitted because we don't understand its link to the promise of restoration. We don't hear it as Matthew's hearers/readers would have heard it. I have to say, though, that in a world that grieves the deaths of so many children to wars prosecuted by modern day Herods, if I were choosing my lessons for this Sunday, I'd be sorely tempted to restore those missing verses.

Second Reading

In previous Divergences on Ephesians, I have given little thought to the intended audience or purpose of the letter as a whole. I have also waffled on whether or not I accept Pauline authorship of the letter, though lately I have come to settle on the opinion that Paul really did write the letter. (This will mean that I have some thorny questions to answer about Paul and women that will be raised by this letter, but I think I have adequate answers there.)

I have said of Paul's letters in general that in order to understand them it is necessary to understand to whom and about which they are written. That is to say, we cannot read them accurately without understanding Paul's intended audience and the reason that occasioned the letter.

This is particularly difficult in Ephesians because Paul does not seem to address any specific difficulties that may have given rise to the letter. This may be due, though, to the possibility that the letter wasn't actually intended just for the church in one city (Ephesus) but was written as a "circular" epistle, one intended to be read in multiple locations. This explanation of the generality of the letter makes sense to me. Yet it still leaves us with the question, "Then what was Paul's reason for writing it?"

In the introduction to the letter, I think we can find some clues. I have included a lot of text in italics above so as to give us a better picture of Paul's introduction and its implications, rather than the lectionary choosers' intentions. The excerpts chosen for reading on this Sunday make for a good preaching perch, but they leave out too much that we need in order to grasp Paul's larger purposes.

The primary indicator of audience and purpose in the letter falls amidst the first group of italicized verses. I need to note here that those italicized verses and the few that precede them really are inseparable. That's because they're all one sentence. Ephesians 1:3-14 is all one incredibly long and complicated sentence with dependent clause heaped upon dependent clause. Our translators have broken it up into several sentences, inserting new sentence subjects here and there just to make it more readable to a modern English speaking audience. And well they might. (I translated the whole letter for a thesis back in seminary. Not a task I'd take up again.)

What is remarkable in this crazy run-on sentence (which actually fits with ancient Greek rhetorical models) is that the pronouns change right in the middle of it. Paul begins by speaking of "we," but in verse 13 he changes to "you." So Paul begins by building rapport with his audience by describing blessings that they all share, but then speaks directly to his intended audience, "you" as recipients "also" of the Holy Spirit.

From this I conclude a few things. 1) There was a perceived (by the intended recipients of the letter) differentiation between Paul's intended audience and some other Christian group. 2) Paul's purpose is to overcome that perception. And 3) It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that is the mark of unity that overcomes this differentiation.

Given that the introductions to Paul's letters always give us a preview of the letters' concerns and purposes, I think we can reasonably conclude that Paul is writing to a group of Christians who see themselves as somehow removed from what they perceive to be a favored group of Christians, a group in which some resentment may be growing. I would suggest that this disaffected group would be comprised of Gentile Christians who may be feeling as though they are a sort of "second-class Christian."

I suggest that they are Gentiles because of Paul's emphasis in the introduction on "inheritance." Given the rootedness of Jewish believers in Christ in their inherited faith, Paul's reference to inheritance that "we" share in verses 11 and 12 which he follows by his claim that "you also" were given a guaranteed (by the Holy Spirit) of inheritance, his intention to bind Gentile Christians into that pattern of inheritance by means of the Spirit seems clear. (And I find myself imitating Paul's run-on sentences!)

From this conclusion I lift one insight that is important to me. As Paul's occasional companion Luke also highlights in his Gospel and Acts, it is the presence of the Holy Spirit among different Christians that binds them together. This same Holy Spirit also binds all Christians to their Jewish siblings, in whom the same Spirit has been active for millenia.

In the present moment in the Church, I think that this same Spirit is perhaps the only restorer of unity left to us.

Gospel Text

(First one, Matthew 2:13-15,19-23)

When I pasted in the texts for this week, I included the verses this reading skipped over, about the murder of the children in and around Bethlehem by Herod. I did it because of the link it provides back to Jeremiah, and I wanted to write a little about the Matthew's intention to link Jesus as strongly to Jeremiah as he does to Moses. While celebrating the season of Christmas, it's not difficult to understand why our lectionary choosers would omit such a grim pericope, and yet we have a "feast day" for the lost children that we "celebrated" on December 28th. The Feast of the Holy Innocents. I won't go down that rabbit hole just now, though. I have something else I'd like to talk about.

"This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

And

"And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene."

These two phrases from Matthew 2 show us how determined the evangelist was also to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. He goes so far as to willfully misread one text and, well, make up another.

In the first case, Matthew cites a word of prophecy entirely out of context, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1) This is of course a reference to the Exodus. It was not a prophecy of something that Hosea imagined happening in the future. And what's worse, it is not an idyllic image of Israel returning to the bosom of Yahweh, but of a disobedient son who is nonetheless drawn by "bands of love."

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more they were called,
the more they went away;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and burning offerings to idols. (ESV)

It is truly remarkable that Matthew might have chosen such an image to apply to Jesus' eventual return from Egypt with His family.

But then we have the claim that it was prophesied of the Messiah that he would be called a "Nazarene." Jesus was called a "Nazarene" in his time, and His followers were, too, but where in the world do we find a prophecy that says this will be what He's to be called? There is nothing in Scripture that says this. Where did Matthew get it?

Well, it's a stretch, but the best explanation I've ever read is this. In Isaiah 11:1 it says, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." The word for "branch" in Hebrew is "neser" or "nezer." (Depending on who's doing the transliterating.) You can see how Matthew might have jumped from *nezer* to "Nazarene." But it clearly says nothing in Isaiah about the Messiah being called a Nazarene.

What this says to us is that our modern notion of prophecy and its function (predicting the future) is very, very different from that of a first century Jewish scribe. For Matthew, the prophets' texts were gold mines from which nuggets of meaning for the present could be drawn from the past. They were not to be limited to their very specific meaning in the past.

A couple of times lately, I've bumped up against a teaching by Gordon Fee, a conservative evangelical Bible scholar. I've read Gordon Fee before, and some of what I read I found valuable, but he also teaches that, "...a text cannot mean what it could never have meant to its original readers/hearers." I don't know where he got this idea. It seems as though he never read Matthew, because Matthew does precisely what Fee says cannot be done. And for this reason, we are authorized to find in the text meanings that would have been foreign to the original readers/hearers.

That may seem to open the door to all kinds of misreadings of the text, and yes, I suppose that it might, but we have as our hermeneutic principle, our lens, the person and character of Jesus. If it is not in keeping with what we find in Jesus, then any reading of the Bible, Greek or Hebrew texts, becomes deeply suspicious.

I included this because those of you who read these Divergences will, I hope, find yourself in conversation with conservative/evangelical readers of the Bible from time to time. I think that it is important to be able to explain why the Bible authorizes us to read it as we do when we come up with interpretations they don't/can't understand. "Yes, well, but the Bible itself does what I'm doing."

Or,

(Second Option, Luke 2:41–52)

One of our choices for a Gospel text this week is the story of Jesus in the Temple as a twelve year old boy. Only Luke among the evangelists chooses to include anything about Jesus' childhood in his Gospel. For this reason, I can only conclude that this short narrative is of considerable importance to Luke and his purpose.

I have written before about the purpose that sets Luke's Gospel apart from any of the others. I believe that he is already addressing and trying to bridge a growing rift between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Of course his primary purpose is to tell the story of Jesus (and early Christians in Acts), but Matthew and Mark had already been written. They were known to Luke. Why then write another, unless to tell the story with another important goal?

There is ample evidence in the letters of Paul (with whom Luke travelled) of friction between the two groups. Some Jewish Christians demanded that all followers of Jesus convert first to Judaism. Some early Christians treated their Jewish siblings with disdain. (See Romans.) So Luke writes his Gospel (and Acts) so as to demonstrate to both groups their relatedness to the other. Because this text occurs only in Luke, I am drawn to the conclusion that it is significant to that purpose.

This story of Jesus in the Temple seems to me to be the climax of three stories that tie Jesus' life to the Temple. First, Zechariah receives word of John's birth in the Temple. Second, Jesus is presented in the Temple before Simeon and Anna. Finally, Jesus remains in the Temple, talking with the teachers, and asks (rhetorically), "Did you not know that I must be among those of my Father?" (I think this is a better translation of what is intentionally a very ambiguous phrase in the Greek. It could mean, "in my Father's house," but there is no "house" in the text. It could be "about my Father's business," better in my mind, but it just says "in these of my Father," so it could mean "among those people who are my Father's.")

From this, I draw two conclusions. 1) Luke wants to tie the Christian narrative as closely as he can to the Temple, which, by the time of his writing, had been destroyed. And 2) Luke wants to demonstrate Jesus' awareness of His status as a "son" of God from the beginning.

Here I will part company with the many commentators who will write of Jesus' awareness of His divinity even as a child. There is no evidence, none at all, that Jesus' reference to God as His father has any connotation of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father that is found in later Christian theology. Luke gives us no clue that

Jesus' earthly parents have told him of the singular nature of His conception and birth. And to be a child of God, to have God as father, is clearly *not* an indication of divinity for Luke. We have only to look a few verses forward to Jesus' genealogy in chapter 3, where Luke speaks of Adam as a son of God.

So we see Jesus, speaking, *but also asking questions and listening to*, the teachers in the Temple. He has a sense of relationship to God that is best described as father/son. And he grasps that this is where he belongs. In the Temple, among those "of his Father."

This brings me to His parents' reaction. They are confused by what He says. Now, we can safely assume that Mary explained the circumstances of Jesus' conception to her husband, so why would they be confused when Jesus says He must be about the things of His father? I think this goes back to the ambiguity of Jesus' statement. "About the things of my father" might just as well refer to Joseph's work. Jesus could possibly be saying, "Why were you so worried? Did you not know that I must eventually come back to be about my father's business?" I think that it is this ambiguity that confuses Mary and Joseph. It seems to me to be the only explanation that makes sense.

Lastly, we have Luke's concluding statement, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." For Luke, Jesus is not fully prepared to take up His ministry at twelve years old. He will grow in wisdom. He astounds the teachers, but He has yet to grow into the adult who will confound them.

Given what I said earlier about Luke's purpose in writing another Gospel, I read this story of Jesus as a boy as the climax/conclusion of the evangelist's attempt to show that the story of Jesus, like the story of the early church, is rooted in the Temple. This seems aimed particularly at the Gentile side of the church, whose sense of connectedness to Judaism may be tenuous. There is no room in Luke for supersessionism. Gentile Christians owe their very existence as Christians to Judaism and the Temple. Like the child Jesus, they have much room to grow "in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."

Or,

Matthew 2:1-12

(Third Option)

The third Gospel text appointed for this Sunday is of course the same that will be read if we have a celebration on the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th, the arrival of the Wise Men. It is strange to me that so beloved a story is usually only heard in church if there is a Christmas Pageant, but that seems to be how things have worked out.

But this week, because we actually have the opportunity to read the story of the wise men, I'd like to point out something that Matthew wants us to learn here, something that stands firmly against a certain variety of Christianity we often see nowadays.

Every since the days of Martin Luther, we have heard from some Christians the principle called "*Sola Scriptura*," that is, "Only Scripture." As if it is only in Scripture that God's will for us is revealed. And yet Scripture itself says differently. Matthew says differently.

Matthew tells us in this story that it is only through a combination of biblical and extra-biblical revelation that we will find the Christ Child. We have two groups of people who see a portion of the truth about His birth, but neither will find Him apart from the other.

The chief priests and scribes have the Scriptures. They know that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, but they would never have found Jesus because His birth was proclaimed in the stars. We have the Gentile wise men (probably Zoroastrians) who constantly searched the heavens for signs and who see the star, but they would never have found the king they sought without the the aid of the Scriptures. Only when the two groups pool their insights is the place where the baby was born revealed.

So having the Scriptures is not enough. Having the revelations God provides in the created order is not enough. For those of us who live with the Scriptures I think this is a caution against closing our eyes to what God is revealing to those who live outside our faith. During Advent we celebrated (if that's the right word) a time of waiting for the Messiah's return. Matthew seems to suggest that God will reveal that return to those who are not yet "of the flock" in a way that we will miss if we do not listen to them and hear what they are seeing.