

Divergence on the Lectionary - Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

First Reading

Isaiah 49:1–7

Listen to me, O coastlands,
 and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The LORD called me from the womb,
 from the body of my mother he named my name.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
 in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
 in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, “You are my servant,
 Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”
But I said, “I have labored in vain;
 I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
 and my recompense with my God.”

And now the LORD says,
 he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
 and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
 and my God has become my strength—
he says:
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob
 and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
 that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Thus says the LORD,
 the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation,
 the servant of rulers:
“Kings shall see and arise;
 princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;
because of the LORD, who is faithful,

the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

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

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 1:29–42

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where

he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter). (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

This week's passage from Isaiah constitutes the second of the "Servant Songs" or "Songs of the Suffering Servant" in Isaiah. Last week I gave a thumbnail sketch of the nature of those songs and the identity of the servant in question. I'd rather not rehash all that here, so *HERE'S A LINK* to that part of last week's Divergence.

This week, I'd like to tackle (perhaps poorly) the question of the dissonance between the universalism we see in this particular Song and the condemnation of the nations (other than Jacob/Israel) that occurs so frequently elsewhere in Isaiah.

During my study of this passage this week I discovered that a fair number of scholars have written articles about this contrast. Their question seems to be, "How can the prophet who prophesied

Kings shall be your foster fathers,
and their queens your nursing mothers.
With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you,
and lick the dust of your feet.
Then you will know that I am the LORD;
those who wait for me shall not be put to shame." (Isaiah 49:23, ESV)

also prophesy

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6, ESV)?

And so they wrestle with this disharmony and come up with a variety of explanations. (Keeping in mind that they universally view the author of the middle portion of the book

of Isaiah (ch. 40-55) as someone other than the prophet of the first portion. But that doesn't really matter when dealing with this question.)

Some argue that at some point Isaiah changed his mind, that the vision of Israel's mission to the nations embodied in the Servant replaced the narrow nationalism of the other prophecies about the *goyim*. This would then require, I suppose, that some subsequent editor interspersed the anti-foreign sections with the more positive ones.

Some argue that the universalism of "Second Isaiah," this middle portion of Isaiah is not to be doubted, and that the nationalistic bits are insertions from later editors. Others suggest that Isaiah may have held that more universal ideal, but prophesied the more nationalistic bits to encourage the people who were so downtrodden in their exile.

More recently, others have taken to arguing that we misunderstand the universalism of our portion of Isaiah for this week and the others like it. They suggest that because Christian theologians since Paul have interpreted "light to the nations" in a missionary way, we have been inclined to overlook other possibilities. The "light" may not be for the *benefit* of the nations, but rather to *dazzle* them. Or perhaps we read "nations" too broadly and Isaiah only speaks of those children of Israel who are scattered among the nations.

And yet no one of them seems willing to consider that both the condemnation and the universalism toward the nations could be true in the same prophet. (Whether you read one prophet or two or three.)

I don't think that these apparently dissonant prophecies toward the nations are any less jarring than the way God speaks to Jacob.

Ah, sinful nation,
 a people laden with iniquity,
 offspring of evildoers,
 children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
 they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
 they are utterly estranged.

Why will you still be struck down?
 Why will you continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick,
 and the whole heart faint.
From the sole of the foot even to the head,

there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
 and raw wounds;
they are not pressed out or bound up
 or softened with oil.

Your country lies desolate;
 your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
 foreigners devour your land;
 it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.
And the daughter of Zion is left
 like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
 like a besieged city. (Isaiah 1:4–8, ESV)

versus

It shall come to pass in the latter days
 that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
 and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
 and many peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
 to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
 and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
 and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
 and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
 and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
 neither shall they learn war anymore.

O house of Jacob,
 come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD. (Isaiah 2:2–5, ESV)

It seems to me that in the heart of Isaiah both these images can live side by side and without conflict. If they can with regard to his own nation, why should they not with regard to other nations?

The difficulty appears to me to be that we have trouble reconciling a God who saves with a God who can feel such anger, such wrath. Even scholars who don't seem to think very spiritually think that we must have one or the other. I don't believe that we have to pick. I do think that the idea of God's wrath has been so misused by so many for so long that it's understandable that we would reject "anger" utterly, but we don't need to. Indeed, we get a much less passionate, less loving God when we fall into that trap. But I wrote on this back during Advent, and if you remember that, I don't want to burden you with another rehearsal of that material. If you don't remember, or didn't read the Divergence that week, *HERE'S A LINK* to that portion of that Divergence. I think it's important and worth a click if you struggle with the "wrath of God."

Second Reading

For our second reading this week we have the opening verses of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We read it as a part of our liturgical season "Epiphany" during which we celebrate the manifestation, the showing forth (*epiphaneo*) of Christ to the nations. As Paul's entire mission is one of spreading the "light of Christ" to the nations, I suppose almost anything he wrote might suffice as an Epistle reading for Epiphany, but we have this one, in which he makes no mention at all of God's revelation specifically to the Gentiles!

Mining the passage for Epiphany themed phrases, though, we do find, "...together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." Beyond that, I'm flummoxed.

So instead of struggling to link our second reading to the season, I'd like to point out some things from the opening passage to First Corinthians that hint at what's to come later in the letter. Because that's what Paul does in the opening of his letters. I can't say for sure that he does it in every one, but almost always he gives you an "abstract" of his letter in the opening sentences. He tells you what he's concerned about, what are the reasons for the letter, right from the beginning. And he certainly does it here.

"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints..." Paul starts off by reminding the Corinthians that they are called to be saints, "holy ones," "*hagioi*." There is considerable, not to say rampant immorality within the congregation at Corinth, and Paul intends to confront some of the worst of it.

“...together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” Among the issues Paul wants to confront in this letter is the disunity of the members of the congregation. He draws the congregation’s eyes and hearts back to the One in whom they have unity, the Lord Jesus Christ, both “their” Lord and “ours.”

“...that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge...” The congregation in Corinth seems to have been very much enamored with what they “knew.” Gnosticism wasn’t an invention of Christians. Varieties of the idea that having secret knowledge somehow elevated you above others, set you apart, had existed for some time. The Corinthians appear to be falling into that error, and Paul goes on later in the letter to remind them that “This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” (1 Cor. 8:1b) I am not certain, but I tend to think that Paul’s reference here to “speech” is also a reference to tongues, perhaps understood in Corinth as a sign of “knowledge.” Paul later tries to put the gift of tongues in its proper perspective.

“...even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you...” This confirmation of the testimony is probably for Paul the infilling of the Corinthians with the Holy Spirit. It is clear that Paul sees this infilling as such a confirmation. He makes clear reference to that in Galatians. (Galatians 3:2) And these manifestations of the Holy Spirit have become a problem in Corinth he’ll deal with later in the letter.

“...so that you are not lacking in any gift...” Again. At least some members, influential members of the Corinthian church, are inordinately fond of, proud of their spiritual “gifts.”

“...as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This may be at the root of the failings of the folks in Corinth. They aren’t waiting for anything. As we read through the letter as a whole we get the picture of a congregation that believes that these spiritual gifts they enjoy are signs that the day of our Lord Jesus Christ has already come. This is it. There is nothing more to look forward to, nothing to work toward. As my Android navigator likes to tell me, “You have arrived.” And this misunderstanding of their place in the plan and process of God has led to the kind of license and licentiousness that the congregation exhibits. This leads to Paul’s lengthy discussion of the resurrection of the dead in chapter 15.

And so, here in the opening sentences we get most of the letter, without the unpleasant specifics.

On to the

Gospel Text

It is tempting, given John's reference to Jesus in our reading for this week as the "Lamb of God" to go off on a discussion of what that means for us, what it means that Jesus is for us the "Lamb of God," the "Agnus Dei." But that would overlook what might be a more fruitful discussion of what it meant for the evangelist we know as John. Or for the Baptist, who called Jesus that.

Scholars have wrestled with these questions at considerable length. I wasn't able this week to read more than a smattering of opinions, but thanks to the scholarly tendency to agree and disagree with one another in print, even a little bit gave me a broader view of the discussion than you might expect.

The questions they tried to answer seem to have been these:

Did the phrase "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" originate with the Baptist, or with the evangelist?"

and,

What did the originator of the phrase, whether the Baptist or the Evangelist, have in mind when they spoke of "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?" To what did this phrase harken?

The first question is a thorny one for the average reader of the Bible, inasmuch as suggesting that the difficulties of this phrase (and they are surely there) then call into question the reliability of the other sayings of John and or Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. If John did not say this, if the evangelist wrote those words because they had become a part of the preaching of the earliest church by the time the Gospel was written, what is to say that other things that Jesus says of Himself were not also the product of the church's theological reflection on the life and death of Jesus?

And yet, these difficulties have to be taken into account.

It is difficult to square John the Baptist's vision of the Messiah as the conquering monarch who would restore the glory of Israel with the idea of a lamb led to the slaughter. After all, it is John who sends his disciples to ask of Jesus at a later time, "Are you the one?" Jesus does not appear to be conforming to John's expectations. So how

could he have imagined Jesus suffering and death at the time of His baptism? Is it not simpler to suggest that this phrase originated in the early church and was later put on the lips of the Baptist by the writer of the Fourth Gospel?

Some scholars would say “Yes.” I would disagree, but I’ll get to that in a bit, because all of the answers to these questions tend to fall together once you consider them as a whole.

The second question isn’t nearly as thorny, but it’s more difficult to work out. That is, when John, either one of them, wrote about the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” what did he mean? Was he speaking of the Paschal Lamb of the Passover? Or the Lamb of the sin offering? Or perhaps the Suffering Servant of Isaiah who “opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter”? (Isaiah 53:7)

We are so accustomed to thinking of Jesus’ death as inextricably bound up with the Passover that we are usually quick to say yes to the first possibility. And yet it is true that the lamb of the Passover was not connected to the expiation of sin. (Though I think I can make that connection, if tenuously.)

It is also true that when a sin offering was made for the whole people at Yom Kippur, the animal on whom the sin of the people was laid was not a lamb, but a goat. So how did John connect the Lamb with the taking away of the sin of the people?

The best answer for this lies in the Songs of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, with which both Johns would have been very familiar.

I’ll quote Isaiah 53 here for you again.

Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
 and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
 and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
 a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
 he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs
 and carried our sorrows;

yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors. (ESV)

We have had read in church the first two Songs of the Servant over the last two weeks. We won't hear this one read out until Lent, but it seems clear that of the possible references, Isaiah is the clearest.

A very interesting suggestion has also been put forth (by J.H. Roberts) that the Greek *amnos tou theou*, translated into English as "the Lamb of God" was in fact a misrendering of an Aramaic word, *talja'*, which carries the double meaning of lamb and child or servant. Thus, John might have said, "Behold the Servant of the Lord," referring to the Servant of Yahweh, in Isaiah, but it was translated as "Behold the Lamb of God" by the Evangelist.

Before wrapping this up with my own solution to these questions, I'd like to make my tenuous connection between the Passover lamb and the removal of sin. As we all know from the story of the first Passover, the blood of the lamb was placed on the lintels of the doors of the Jewish people in Egypt to protect them from the destroyer who struck down the first-born of every household not so marked.

And then we find in Leviticus, "And he [the priest] shall kill the lamb of the guilt offering. And the priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering and put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot. (Leviticus 14:25, ESV)

The blood of the lamb of the guilt offering is also placed as a mark on the one to be cleansed of guilt. If this blood had only been sprinkled on the altar, I would not want to make this connection, but because it is also used as a mark to free one from guilt, a mark of one to be spared, I think there is a way that the blood of the Paschal lamb can also be seen as connected to sin, to guilt. It isn't strong, but I think it's there.

Now I get to my solution to these questions.

Almost all of the difficulties we find in these words of the Baptist's derive from the modern assumption that he (the Baptist) had to know exactly what he meant when he said them. Because we are intellectually suspicious, and because it's difficult to reconcile John's vision of a Davidic monarch with a sacrificial lamb, we are prone to take the simple way out and say that the evangelist John has just used words from the church that he knew to give shape to the Baptist's proclamation regarding Jesus.

This suggestion founders on two points. First, of the four Gospels, only John is the product of the memories of a man who actually walked with Jesus, who knew the twelve disciples. We know that man as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." It is likely then that much of what we find in John is in fact every bit as accurate as what is related in the first

three Gospels. Second, the fact that “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” is difficult is in fact reason to trust it not distrust it. Scholars of the New Testament will tell you that one of the things they use to help them determine the likelihood that Jesus actually said something we find in the Gospel is its “difficulty.” The more difficult it would have been for the author of the Gospel to write it, the more likely it is that he believed Jesus really said it. There is no reason to use this criterion of difficulty only for the sayings of Jesus. To suggest that John actually spoke these words long before the church adopted them in its preaching and worship seems hardly easier than to choose to put them into the mouth of someone who didn’t say them.

But in the end most of the difficulty here is that in the modern era we have such a limited experience of or faith in the reality of prophecy. Because prophecy is a bigger part of my own experience, it isn’t hard for me to grasp that John may have been inspired to utter words whose full meaning he did not grasp. He may have had some idea that his cousin was related to the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah. I think he probably did on some level. He may not have understood that his prophecy was one of an expiatory death when he spoke it, any more than Isaiah fully envisioned Jesus when he spoke of the Servant of Yahweh. But I believe both prophesied regarding Jesus without fully grasping what they said.

I’m going to stop here before I get caught up in an explanation of how I’ve seen prophecy work in my own life and experience. I don’t want to bore you. Maybe another day.