

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

First Reading

Isaiah 9:1–4 (5-7 added in italics for context)

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
 on them has light shone.
You have multiplied the nation;
 you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of his burden,
 and the staff for his shoulder,
 the rod of his oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.

*For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
 and every garment rolled in blood
 will be burned as fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
 and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
 there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
 to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
 from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (ESV)*

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 4:12–23 (24-25 added for context)

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people dwelling in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
on them a light has dawned."

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their

nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. *So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.* (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

In this week's passage from Isaiah we hear some very familiar words. They are especially familiar when we add in the verses that follow the lectionary selection, and we recognize them as the first reading from the lections for Christmas I. (Though the Christmas reading omits verse one.) I don't know about you, but I can't read these verses without singing along (at least in my head) with Handel, "For unto us a child is born!"

But those are not the verses selected for this week. I did some additional study on Isaiah 9 this week and learned some really interesting things, but most of them are going to have to be put into a revision of the Divergence for Christmas I. I tried to cram them in here, but they just don't fit!

No, this week, we have,

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.

In this season of Epiphany, during which we celebrate the showing forth of the light of Christ to the nations, we are focused on the coming of light into darkness. Isaiah hadn't anything of the sort in mind when he received and gave this prophecy. His focus was his people, the people of Judah who were in this period in great turmoil. Faithlessness and the threat of Assyria weighed heavily on the hearts and minds of the nation and it is they who have "walked in darkness" and to whom a great light will come.

I would like to emphasize here that this *does not invalidate* our reading of this prophecy as one that speaks to the coming of Jesus. I really hope that we can hold two truths together without having to eliminate either one. It can be quite true that Isaiah saw the heart of God to save, and to establish peace forever, and still to think that this vision is connected to a person in his own time, his own life. Isaiah's expectation did come to pass, even if it didn't happen when he thought it would. I would really like us to be able to honor prophecy and the integrity of the prophet without imposing too much Christian thought on his own way of seeing and thinking.

This seems to me to suggest that I can myself live in prophetic hope, even if it's a hope I don't live to see come to fruition. I can live in that hope and not be "wrong" just because it doesn't happen in my lifetime. I draw some encouragement from that these days, when Justice and Peace seem so tantalizingly real and yet so distant.

Second Reading

At some point after Paul's initial visit to Corinth, during which he first preached the Gospel and began a church in the city, Apollos, a gifted orator and evangelist, also spent time preaching there. Subsequently the congregation began to divide itself into factions that Paul describes in our reading for this week. You may recall from last week's Divergence the way that Paul hinted at his concern in the introduction to the letter when he reminded them that they were "...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." The emphasis on "together" and the reminder that they call upon the Name of Jesus Christ looks ahead to Paul's corrective words to them, that their faith is in Jesus, not in himself, (Paul) or Apollos, or Peter.

The final sentence of our reading for this week is really the beginning of another discussion of the place of "wisdom" (earthly) in the kingdom, versus the "folly" of the Gospel. Frankly, it just doesn't belong at the end of our reading. Either that, or we should have included the whole discussion of wisdom and foolishness. It does seem to me that this contributed to the factionalism in Corinth, in particular the contrast between Paul's plain preaching and the oratory skills of Apollos.

Shorn of the distinctions between wise and foolish though, our passage recalls to me the opening sentences of the Episcopal rite for Baptism, "One Lord, one faith, one Baptism." Most Christian denominations now recognize the validity of any baptism as long as the individual is baptized in the Name of the Trinity. What matters is that we recognize our unity in Christ. Yes, we have differences in our liturgies, in our understandings of the

Scripture, but next to the oneness that the Father creates in us through the gift of His Son and the power of the Spirit, those divisions fade to insignificance.

I once saw a post recently from a new friend in the Order of Saint Luke the Physician. At a recent conference they held a closing worship service at which clergy from a multitude of denominations gathered around the altar together. Celebrated the Eucharist together. It included a photo of them all (I don't remember the number, but it must have been a couple dozen or so.) holding hands in a circle around that altar. No worries about our theologies of Real Presence or Apostolic Succession or the validity of Orders, just unity in their worship of the One in whom they believe. This is a unity that pre-exists our ability to perceive it. Our failure to recognize it doesn't erase it, though it makes a lie of it to the rest of the world.

What do you think Paul would write to the church at large if he looked on us today?

Gospel Text

Our reading from Matthew this week begins with his reference to the passage from Isaiah that was our first reading this week. I would like to reiterate here that while Isaiah no doubt had a specific child in mind when he was inspired to prophesy this, it does not mean that Jesus cannot also be the object of the prophecy. If there is one thing that I'd like you to take away from all of this it's that the heart of prophecy is the heart of God. That is, the prophet sees the heart of God and understands it to have a given application in a given situation, but that Heart doesn't change, and the words given in one setting can be equally applicable in another. And as in the case of Jesus we have the full revelation of the heart of the One He called Father, so He remains the "fulfillment" of all prophecies.

From the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy Matthew moves us into the activity of Jesus immediately after His return from the wilderness and His temptations. He doesn't preach Himself, though we're inclined to preach Jesus rather than what He preached. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God. And He doesn't preach it as a thing yet to come but something that is "at hand." I would prefer to translate the Greek *engiken* we have in English as "at hand" as "has come." It carries better the already accomplished sense of the perfect tense in the Greek.

To "believe in Jesus" is to believe that truth that He preached. That the Kingdom of God is already here. I know that we often speak of the Kingdom as "already and not-yet," but I don't find that to be faithful to the Gospel we're given to preach. The Gospel may not be fully seen, fully recognized, but I believe that it is nonetheless fully present and our

task is not to “bring the Kingdom in” but to preach the Truth of its presence and watch Creation conform to that Truth.

One thing that’ll pop up in more detail in later Divergences is that when we read Paul exhorting us to “have faith in Jesus” what he really says (in almost every case) is “have the faith *of* Jesus.” Have the faith He had. The faith that the Father has already brought the Kingdom into being, and we have only to see it and be conformed to it.

More on that another time. Our reading this week also includes the calling of Peter and Andrew. Some might contrast that with the story of Andrew and Peter from John’s Gospel we had last week. In that we see Andrew (at that time a disciple of the Baptist) go to spend time with Jesus, and then go to find his brother Simon, whom Jesus renames Cephas, or Peter, when He sees him. In this week’s lesson we see Jesus call the brothers (Simon is now called Peter!) away from their nets to come and fish for people. I don’t see any contrast at all. In the one, they meet Jesus and spend time with Him, in the next He calls them to be His first followers. To me, they’re sequential.

One thing that has bothered me in the past that I want to say “Hey! Andrew found Jesus first! Why does Peter always get named first when the two of them are named together?” I suppose that this is because of Peter’s preeminence in the early church. I suspect it’s also true that Matthew didn’t know about the story of Andrew and Peter that John relates, but that doesn’t matter much. But what’s certain here is that Jesus doesn’t call the brothers to be fishers who bring others to Himself, but to catch them up in the net that is the Kingdom, the *present* Kingdom.

What that means for our preaching means this to me: We are called to tell others of the citizenship they already hold in the Kingdom. We don’t invite people into anything, we tell them where they already are and the dignity that has already bestowed on them. When their hearts are caught up in that new net they discover that their new identities go far beyond just citizenship to the role of friend, lover, and child. I think Kingdom preaching is a first step. The other roles seem to me to be ones that we step into as we mature in our faith, but Kingdom is where Jesus began, and so I think it’s where we begin, too.

In a country whose origins are in deep suspicion and rejection of monarchy, in a time when we reject the assumption of great power by any individual, the notion of “Kingdom” is a difficult one to preach. But I think that it needs preaching, especially in an era in which we see large segments of the populations of a number of countries, including our own, turning toward authoritarian figures. I think that speaks to the deep longing of the human heart for a “king.” They forget that God warned us against the making of Kings in 1 Samuel 8. “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over

you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. (1 Samuel 8:11–16, ESV)

It seems to me that the effective preaching of the Kingdom of God is a remedy to the human tendency to keep looking for a human king to do what only God can do, and the disastrous consequences that choice brings.

Do we have a reluctance to preach “Kingdom?” Is that why it’s easier for many preachers to preach Jesus rather than Kingdom?