

Divergence on the Lectionary - Second Sunday of Easter, Year A

First Reading

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 (omitted verses in italics)

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them:

“Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

*“And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.
And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord
shall be saved.’*

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him,

*“I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
my flesh also will dwell in hope.
For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One see corruption.*

You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

“Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Peter 1:3–9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 20:19–31

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I

see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

I suppose that after having so many long readings in the last week of Lent it is understandable that the choosers of our Lectionary decided to give us an abbreviated version of Peter’s speech on the Day of Pentecost. By doing what they did they have focused our attention on one portion of Peter’s argument to the crowd, the element that is most urgent only one week after our celebration of Jesus’ resurrection.

But by doing that they have defeated Peter’s purpose, which is to present to as-yet-unbelieving Jewish hearers a persuasive argument that Jesus is both Lord and Christ. That purpose is hidden by the omission of these concluding verses.

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.”

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:33–36, ESV)

We who are the heirs of more than two millennia of Christian exegesis and preaching take the conclusions of Peter's speech here for granted. Of course Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. But our familiarity with this conclusion made me overlook until this week the complexity of Peter's use of Scripture to lead his hearers to the conclusion that he desired, that is, their conversion.

Peter makes use, in the passage that we *are* reading for 2 Easter, of Psalm 16, when he points to David's assertion that God will not abandon his soul to Hades or allow his body to see corruption. This is, according to the scholars I've read this week, a singular application of the psalm. Psalm 16 was not one of the texts the rabbis had interpreted as "messianic" prior to the time that Christians adopted it as such, so Peter had no precedent for it. Using the text as he did though, Peter makes the argument from his own experience (witness to the resurrection) that Jesus is the one to whom David referred.

And yet, Jesus' resurrection and ascension actually isn't sufficient argument that Jesus is "Lord." As the descendent of David (and therefore "part" of David) who does not suffer corruption He may be seen as Messiah, it lead necessarily to the conversion Peter seeks. It is "calling on the name of the Lord" that saves, according to the passage from Joel that was omitted from our text this week, and so both those titles "Lord and Christ" are important to Peter, and we have missed out on the argument for "Lord" that Peter makes from Joel.

I haven't done anywhere near justice to the articles I read this week discussing Peter's speech in Acts 2, but I hope that I've at least helped you to see how important this speech was in drawing together texts (some of which are unique to the argument) that point to Jesus as both "Lord" and "Christ," in making an argument to Jewish people who did not yet believe, but to whom both of those titles were meaningful. I find that reading this speech up to this point I have a tendency to nod my head and say, "Yes, that's it, of course!" but it was no matter of course to Peter or to Luke who recorded the speech in his second volume, Acts.

I find that I read it quite differently now, hearing Peter speak in the context to a group of Jewish hearers, making an argument never before heard or thought. I hope that you do, too.

Second Reading

Commentators appear to vary, but not greatly, when it comes to identifying the central theme of 1 Peter. While some (e.g. Schrage) see a dual purpose (1. life within a hostile

society and 2. Joy in suffering) most focus almost entirely on the latter of those two purposes of the letter, that is, encouraging Christians who are suffering for their faith.

While it is true that the epistle has some fairly lengthy sections that describe the desired behavior toward authority, of husbands to wives and wives to husbands, of servants to masters and other more general daily guidance, students of 1 Peter tend to see those sections as more specific descriptions of what it means to live in joy in the midst of suffering/persecution.

What troubles me about a few of the commentaries/articles I've read is that the authors frequently confuse that suffering with the "will of God" for the believer. As Peter makes comparisons between suffering and purifying fire, they make the mistake of leaping to the conclusion that God has *chosen* that suffering for the believer, so as to purify their faith. I'm astonished that they don't see how cruel that makes God out to be.

It is one thing to say that God knows we will sometimes suffer for our faith, and another to say that God intentionally places us in the crucible. Yes, God has *allowed* me to pass through some fairly intense moments of fire, but I will never believe that God put me into those positions. Graham Cooke says it this way, "God sometimes permits in His wisdom what He could easily prevent in His power." But let me be very clear about this. I believe that the suffering that I/we encounter in this world is the result of human sin, not God's will. But as Paul reminds me in Romans, even *those* things God works to my good. And yes, my faith is purified, strengthened, made more beautiful when I discover the upgrades (another favorite word of Graham Cooke) in my relationship with God that are available in each of these periods of testing. I am shaped by them, made to reflect more clearly the image of my Savior. But God didn't bring them upon me.

I would like to add an interesting thing that one commentator pointed out. There is a "tradition" of "joy in suffering" that we can trace backwards from 1 Peter and other New Testament authors through Jesus back into Judaism. This tradition goes back at least to the time of the Maccabees. But the author pointed out one significant difference. For the Jewish teachers in the times before Jesus, the joy was something promised for the future, and while we see some of that in 1 Peter, "to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ," this joy is also something that is to be known/enjoyed in the present.

Given all this, how does it cause you to think about Christians who complain so loudly about the way that non-Christians or institutions treat them?

Gospel Text

Oh my goodness! It's "Thomas Sunday," and when you look at the articles that are available online (which is what I often do to get a fresh take on the texts, lacking access to a really good theological library) there is a plethora of material to choose from. I could write three entirely different "Divergences" on this section of John just on what I've read this morning. (But I won't.) Fortunately for me, this Gospel text comes around every year on 2 Easter, so I can add something new without having to wait three years. That might help keep me from writing too much this time. Maybe.

The discussions I've read so far (there may be more, I stopped after a while) seem to focus on three different themes within today's reading.

1. Was the gift of the Holy Spirit in verse 22 a complete gift (my words, trying to summarize) or more of an anticipation of the full gift at Pentecost?
2. The meaning of Jesus's words in verse 23 about forgiving sins.
3. The "Purpose of the Fourth Gospel" as it's described in verse 31.

All three of those topics are incredibly rich to me, and I'm going to hate myself for not tackling them all this week/year, but I want to try to focus on one thing at a time.

And this year, I'm going to focus on number 2. Why? Well, to be quite honest, I got really excited when I found a really scholarly reading of verse 23 (along with two similar phrases in Matthew) that confirmed a sermon I preached many years ago on the same texts, having retranslated them on my own.

Let's face it, you can only preach on poor Thomas and how he gets a bad rap for "doubting" so many times. So one year I just sat down and translated the whole passage over again to see if something new jumped out at me, and boy, did it.

You see, when Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld," that's not what He said. What He said was, "If you forgive the sins of any, they have been forgiven them. If you withhold forgiveness, it has been withheld."

In both those sentences the verbs at the end of the sentence, forgive and withhold, are in the *perfect tense*. The author of the article that got me so excited then quoted five or six Greek grammar textbooks, and they all said pretty much the same thing, "The perfect indicative indicates a past action as present *to the speaker*." In other words, Jesus is saying that whatever forgiveness the disciples declare or withhold is a completed past event *as present to Jesus when he said it*.

Now the author of this article (J. R. Mantey) points to this accomplished reality because he's arguing that the phenomenon of "sacerdotalism," that is, the notion that certain persons have the authority to bestow or withhold forgiveness (that is, an ordained class of Christians) is unsupportable by this text or the texts from Matthew 16 or 18 that are traditionally cited in favor of this clerical prerogative.

He also points out that no early Christian writer of the first two centuries cites any of these texts in support of sacerdotalism. And he shows that in fact, early Latin translations of these three texts were mistranslated into the future tense to support their arguments. It is clear that these texts just didn't say what these early Latin writers wanted them to say.

Now, as a priest from that tradition (that's what *sacerdos* means - priest), I might be inclined to steer clear of this accurate reading of John (and Matthew) except that it is perfect keeping with what Jesus says of Himself and His own actions earlier in the Fourth Gospel. "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise." (John 5:19)

So what Jesus says to the disciples after He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit," is this; "Now that you have the same Spirit that I have had all along, you will do what I've done, that is, do what the Father has already done, forgive sins. And you will only withhold it from those from whom the Father has already withheld it."

I won't go into the absurdity of asking who those people are from whom God would withhold forgiveness. The simple answer is, "Nobody." But Jesus adds that because it must be maintained that God has a *choice* in this. God doesn't withhold forgiveness because He *chooses* not to, not because He must.

And I have no authority, nor does any Christian, to withhold that which God does not withhold. Not for anyone, not for anything. It is because of the Gift of the Holy Spirit that I can see what the Father is doing, and align what I am doing with what He's already up to.

And no, I'm going to go down the "Receive the Holy Spirit" rabbit trail. Not this year!