

Divergence on the Lectionary - The Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A

First Reading

Acts 1:6–14

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Peter 4:12–14, 5:6–11

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal

glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 17:1–11

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

I have already discussed in the Divergence for the Feast of the Ascension the way that Jesus’ being “taken up” is more than just this event where He’s taken from the disciples. It is, in Luke’s understanding the culmination of being “taken up” that begins with Jesus’ crucifixion (lifted - on the Cross), continues through His resurrection, and then finally concludes with this event. To read that in more detail, please see the other Divergence.

Here we have a few extra verses tacked onto the end of the reading for the Ascension. In it we are told who it was that returned from Olivet and gave themselves to prayer. It isn’t often that I get to write on a passage *after* I’ve engaged in some group Bible study on it, but I messed up the readings for this week, Ascension and 7 Easter, and I had only prepared Ascension’s first reading. So I got to hear in our group how important it was to

the only woman present (It's not usually that way.) how much it meant to her to read that among those gathered were "the other women and Mary the mother of Jesus."

I'm married to a woman who's been a priest longer than I have. Her last parish was a lot bigger than mine. I guess I take the acceptance of women in ministry for granted among Episcopalians, but here's a woman expressing gratitude that women's presence was mentioned in Acts.

Lately I've become a more active on Twitter, and most of the people I seem to be following are engaged in a daily struggle to see women and other excluded minorities accepted and honored and listened to in their denominations. I am frequently stunned to see just how cruelly they are attacked by the (mostly cisgendered white men) in those branches of the Church, and I'm grateful that I have lived my whole life on another branch. But I thought my branch had laid that aside, and it was clear to me today that while we may have done so officially, we still have a ways to go to make that felt in the pews. God forgive me for taking that for granted.

Second Reading

I was going to put into this commentary at least some of the verses omitted from 1 Peter for this feast day, but then I read them and I thought they'd just raise more questions than they answered. Then I saw that they'd mistranslated *apeitho* as disobey rather than disbelieve again (see last week's Divergence) and decided to go with what we have.

And what we have, or at least, what caught at my heart this week, is this, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." I have heard that verse quoted so very many times as a warning. Often accompanied by the words "Be vigilant!" or something similar. But it's pretty clear that this isn't what Peter meant at all. If we read the verse in context we have,

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God (so that at the proper time he may exalt you), casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

I put the words "so that at the proper time he may exalt you" in parentheses so that you could read the sentence with the right rhythm. So that you'll read it, "Humble yourselves... casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you." Then he goes

on to say that we should be “sober-minded” and “watchful.” When the NT speaks of being “watchful” it is always (as far as I can tell) a reference to watching for the Lord’s return. Not looking out for something that’s dangerous. We’re to watch for something that we want, not be afraid of something we don’t. Only then does Peter describe our adversary, prowling around like a roaring lion. We aren’t to be afraid of the enemy. On the contrary, we are to cast all our anxieties on God, who cares for us, so that we will be *unafraid*. This passage has been quoted too often to make people afraid of the enemy. Peter sounds more like Franklin Roosevelt. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Gospel Text

In my discussion of our reading from Acts I talked about my discovery that for Luke there is a unity that binds Jesus’ Passion, His Resurrection, and His Ascension. All of this is summed up in Luke 9:51 when he makes reference to the time for Jesus to be “taken up.”

Our passage from John shows the same understanding when we hear Jesus speak of His impending Passion as His glorification. He is “going to the Father” but this path leads directly *through* the Cross. It doesn’t go around it, it doesn’t come after it. Jesus isn’t looking ahead to the good things that will come after He suffers, He sees it all as one.

I have spoken elsewhere about the times that I have heard Christians criticized for using a Crucifix rather than an “empty Cross.” To those criticisms I would also respond, “You can’t choose one and reject the other. Jesus saw the Cross as His moment of glory, not just His resurrection, and certainly not His ascension. It is all one in the Gospel. It isn’t one or the other. We don’t worship Jesus because He ascended, we worship Him because he was “taken up,” which includes being lifted up on the Cross, taken down and buried, raised from the dead AND carried into heaven.”

We cannot separate them.