

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 10, Year A (both tracks)

First Reading

Genesis 25:19–34 (track one)

These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger."

When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (ESV)

Isaiah 55:10–13 (track two)

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,

giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

“For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the LORD,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 8:1–11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 13:1–9, 18-23 (omitted verses included in italics)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

*““You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”
For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in

himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Genesis text (track one)

In our reading from Genesis we have the birth of Jacob and his elder twin, Esau. Genesis is full of origin stories, and this certainly counts as one of them, Esau will become the father of the Edomites, of whom we hear often in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is said that they are called “Edom” because of the red stew he’d chosen over his birthright (and the fact that he was born red and hairy). “Edom” sounds like “red” in Hebrew.

But of greater interest to me is the way that the author of this passage paints one of the Patriarchs of Israel. Jacob/Israel is named a cheat for the way that he grasps at his brother’s heel, and he is shown to live up to his name by the way that he treats his starving brother, thereby usurping (another translation of Jacob) his brother’s right as the eldest.

Much can be made of Jacob’s deceit (It certainly goes on in the stories to come.) but in this moment I’d like to look at the way that our story today seems to focus less on Jacob’s bad behavior and more on the way that Esau despises his birthright.

This is how the story concludes. That’s the “punchline” if you will. Too much focus on Jacob here will cause us to overlook the author’s point. He despised his birthright.

As children of the Most High, what birthright is ours? How great, how magnificent might it be? Are there times in our lives that we cast that birthright aside in order to satisfy immediate wants or needs? What might become of us if we clung as fiercely to our birthrights as Jacob did to Esau’s heel?

Isaiah text (track two)

Our passage from Isaiah this week comprises the last few verses of the middle section of the Book of Isaiah, often called Second-, or Deutero-Isaiah. You’ll recall from other Divergences that this section is prophesied for the people of God who are suffering in

exile in Babylon. There are several themes in Second Isaiah, comfort to the afflicted, the coming glorification of Servant Israel, the humiliation of Babylon, the role of Cyrus of Persia. It is in Second Isaiah that we see the first real emergence of monotheism in Scripture. While in previous writings God has been the *greatest* of Gods, it is only in chapters 40-55 of Isaiah that it becomes clear that God is the *only* God.

Our reading today forms a neat bookend with the opening of Second Isaiah. In it the prophet declares that God's word shall not return to Them empty, but shall accomplish that which it purposes. In the opening verses of chapter 40 we hear,

Isaiah 40:6–8

A voice says, "Cry!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever. (ESV)

The word spoken in comfort and promise of future restoration stands forever, and it shall not return until it has done what it came to do, to lift up and glorify God's Servant Israel.

While there is a lot of great reading in Second Isaiah, including all the Servant Songs, this feels like a good summary that some AI might come up with if you asked it to "tell me what Second Isaiah is about."

Second Reading

This week we enter into the eighth chapter of Romans, where we'll stay for three consecutive Sundays. It has been called by commentators the "pinnacle" of his theology, the "core" of his theological anthropology, the "essence" of his soteriology, the "key" to his pneumatology, and it is hard to refute these claims. We can mine this chapter for insights into Paul's understanding of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and how they live and work in and for us, and I'll certainly tackle some parts of this in the next three weeks, but before I could begin to think about these points of theology in themselves, I found myself asking, "And why is all this in Paul's letter to the Romans and not found in a significant way elsewhere?"

That is to say, I am never satisfied to read Paul apart from the context into which the letter was intended to go. All of Paul's letters are contingent. He never meant them to be stand-alone documents. Their existence is conditional upon the needs of the congregation (or person) to whom he wrote.

Chapter 8 of Romans is so majestic, so heart-poundingly beautiful that it is easy (at least for me) to forget that reality, but if I am to wring from the text the meanings that Paul truly intended, I cannot excise it from its setting. I will be trying to keep this context in mind, too, as we read Romans 8 for the next three weeks.

Our reading begins, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." If that's not a Scripture worth memorizing, I don't know one. I have certainly used it, out of context, as a kind of prooftext, from time to time. But it requires context like anything else. In the letter itself this sentence follows immediately upon Paul's incredibly confusing discussion of the human's inability (pre-belief in Jesus, I think) to do as they want. Here are a few verses from Just before verse 8:1.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7:21–25, ESV)

In the wake of that helpless cry of thanksgiving for a Savior who lifts him out of that quagmire, Paul's opening to chapter 8 makes greater sense. (Especially as he didn't know he was starting a new chapter!)

Now I'll tackle a few of the following verses one at a time, as Paul unpacks what he means in 8:1.

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do... (8:3a)

What has God done? What Paul said in 8:2, set the reader free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

Then in 8:3b he goes on to explain *how* God has done in Jesus what the law could not do, "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh."

And why was it necessary for Jesus to take on flesh, that sin might be condemned “in the flesh” (that is, in His flesh)?

8:4a ...in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us....

Whoa. What is this righteous requirement of the law? Isn't that recompense for sin, i.e. death? Apparently not. God condemned sin in Jesus' flesh so that something else entirely could be fulfilled in us.

And what is that which the law requires?

8:4b...who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Walking according to the Spirit. God made/makes this possible through the condemnation imputed to His Son's flesh, causing us to walk in the Spirit as the law required, but could not enable us to do.

And all of this? Because of that quagmire in chapter 7. Because our flesh simply could not comply with the law's requirements in a way that enabled us to walk in the Spirit.

The remainder of the verses seem to be to be a description of what it means to walk in the Spirit. Not a requirement, but a description of what it looks like (or doesn't look like, if we walk according to the flesh.)

Before I take a stab at contextualizing all this, a couple of comments on terms that Paul uses in our reading for today. You may remember that in an earlier Divergence I pointed out that Paul often uses “death” as a description of a present reality, of what it means to walk without the light of Jesus. Often, “death” has no reference to physical death, and never to future condemnation. This is the way I'd read this word in today's readings.

The other phrase I'd like to point to is “give life.” This way of translating *zoopoieo* from the Greek may read better in English, but it lacks the real sense of the verb. To “give life” is to give some kind of gift, as though it could be received. The verb gives no room to the one being “given” life to receive it. The verb says, “make to live.” It evokes the imagery of Genesis 2, where God takes a lump of lifeless clay and puts His Spirit into him, causing Adam to be alive. There is no “giving” of life here, there is God, taking something that is not alive and making it into something that is alive by putting Spirit into it. It is this starkness that Paul describes here when he speaks of God making our bodies into living things through His indwelling Spirit.

All right. Context. Why was it important for Paul to say these things to the Romans? Why isn't all this in one of the Corinthian letters? Or Thessalonians?

Remember that the Roman congregation is divided. Most commentators will say that the division is between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. A great deal of this will revolve then around the necessity or non-necessity of Torah obedience.

Read in this context, Paul can perhaps be seen to be arguing against the Jewish-Christian belief that they remain beholden to the Law even though they also believe in the salvific purposes of Jesus. I find this unsatisfactory.

Other commentators (by whom I am persuaded) think that the Christian portion of the Roman congregation is all (or nearly all) Gentile, and that the Jewish component of the congregation is only that. Jewish, not Jewish Christian. This makes much better sense of some parts of the letter and causes me to read this passage differently.

In this context Paul is not arguing against the beliefs of Jewish Christians. He is reminding the Gentile Christians of how hopeless they were to be pleasing to God apart from His saving work in Jesus and the enduement of their dead flesh with Spirit. Yes, he is contrasting that with the as-yet-unconverted members of the congregation, but only in a way that is meant to humble them (the Christians) and to cause them to have compassion for their Jewish siblings in the congregation. This is part of the reason why I think that it's important for us to get our utter passivity with regard to God's making us alive. He doesn't give us anything. We aren't any more able to receive it than the first lump of clay.

That will have to do for Romans this week. I must move on to Matthew!

Gospel Text

Matthew gives us the Parable of the Sower this week. The meaning of the parable itself isn't that difficult for us to grasp, but I have always come away from this story with a rather different question. "How do we get to being good soil if we're not already?" There's nothing in the story that answers that question. If I look at it and I'm still pretty stony soil, what hope do I have?

Another question raised by the Gospel text, at least for me, concerns Jesus' use of parables, and His peculiar answer to the disciples about why He uses them. These verses are omitted, though, in our Sunday lectionary. You may choose to overlook this rather vexing issue, but for the sake of our study here in the Divergences, I'll give it some ink (or, pixels, as it were).

Many years ago I spent some time meditating on the first of these questions, “How do we get from being one type of soil to the more fruitful one?” Out of that pondering came the first short story I ever wrote (I think). That story is available here on The Vicar’s Keep, so rather than rehash it I’ll just provide a link to the story [HERE](#). I hope that you’ll enjoy it.

Then we have Jesus’ use of parables and His explanation of why He uses them. (Which isn’t really in our reading for this Sunday, but still demands of me that I deal with it...)

“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

*““You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”
For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

“To the one who has, more will be given.... But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” This sounds manifestly unjust. Shouldn’t the one who has not be the first to receive? In what way is the reflective of God’s love? I have my own way of understanding this, and I offer it here, but I don’t pretend to any certainty about it.

“To the one who has...” I believe this refers to the person who has some grasp of the real nature of God, the One for whom forgiveness is central to His Being and who can read the inevitability of the Cross (as Jesus and many of the prophets did) throughout the

history of God's saving history. To those who have some inkling of Who God Really Is, the parables give more. They deepen that understanding.

But to those for whom God is still fundamentally transactional, a god who gives and takes according to what we have somehow earned or deserved, the parables are a confusion. They will undermine what understanding they think they have, so that "even what he has will be taken away." While this seems unjust in some sense, it is in fact a necessary prerequisite to coming to know the God Who Is, rather than the transactional deity they have chosen for themselves.

I liken this to the process of breaking an addiction. You can tell me how much better it is to live without it, but I will be unable to accept, to believe, to receive that truth until I have first simply done without the object of my addiction for some time. I must have the thing that that I have "taken away" before I have room in my heart to hold any other truth.

And parables work in a way that lifts up the one whose heart has been emptied in this way, while resisting the interpretation of those who cling to a wrong God. That is, they allow the addict to "hit rock bottom" so that they may begin to hear the Good News of God in Christ. Why not say these things plainly? Because it just doesn't work. But to those with eyes to see, the parables do lift up, build up.

Before I go I'd like to commend to your reading "The Rock," that short story I mentioned above. I think of it as rather like a parable on a parable. It's style is heavily beholden to that of Shel Silverstein. I really do like this little piece. I hope you will.