PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE SUNDAY LITURGY

An Overview of the Readings for Year C

Advent 2003 to January 2004

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IN THE CATHOLIC parish of Salisbury in South Australia in which I minister and at the Adelaide College of Divinity where I teach the Bible, I have often been asked about providing a guide for understanding the Bible readings proclaimed in the Sunday Eucharist. There are many comprehensive resources available, authored by excellent biblical scholars and liturgists. These offer in-depth studies of the readings and suggestions as to how the Liturgy of the Word might be proclaimed and celebrated. What is offered here is a little more modest. It is a very simple and brief overview of each of the readings that will be proclaimed while this issue of Compass is current. There are two parts to what follows:

Part One provides general notes about the readings which will be proclaimed. It is a brief summary of current scholarship on the particular Bible writing and isolates the central themes represented in the Lectionary readings.

Part Two is a brief overview of the Lectionary Readings for the particular Sunday or Feast. The comments accompanying each reading are very brief, sometimes only a few words. The thoughts are, naturally, idiosyncratic, though I hope respectful of the intent of their original writer. I have written them, too, aware of contemporary biblical scholarship. Each celebration also has a suggested theme accompanying the Sunday. This suggestion has emerged out of my own context. They may or not be helpful, or may spark other suggestions locally more relevant.

Please feel free to adapt and disseminate what follows, honouring, of course, the usual conventions of authorship.

PART ONE: NOTES ON THE READINGS

The first reading (from the Jewish Bible) is selected with the Gospel in mind. The theme of this first reading is usually intended to conlose with a theme from the Gospel. However, the first reading must be viewed as an important reading, in its own right, and should be reflected on from the perspective of the Jewish community that first heard it. How would this community have understood it?

A glance of the selection of the readings from the Hebrew Bible from the beginning of September 2003 until the end of January 2004 indicates a wide variety of choices. We also move through to the end of one liturgical year (Year B) and commence another (Year C). A few background comments to the main selection of readings might help to contextualise the particular choice of readings for the Sunday.

During Advent of Year C the first reading always comes from the Prophets. In the past these readings were selected as a way of highlighting and preparing for the coming of God in the birth of Jesus. The readings were thus used as a way of anticipating the New Testament readings, especially the Gospel, and seeing Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. There are several problems with this approach, not the least being that it discredits the Scriptures of the Jewish people. A more faithful way of proclaiming these readings is to acknowledge the way these readings would have been heard by their original Jewish audience, and not as prophetic promises fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. How would the prophet’s original audience have heard and understood the message in the readings? Each of the readings offers a word of hope, joy, encouragement and trust in God. This message is authentic on its own, without having to make it refer to Jesus and his coming.

For Christmas and the Sundays after Christmas Year C (Holy Family, Epiphany, Baptism of Jesus) the OT readings are not to be understood simply as readings prophesying about or anticipating Jesus. Rather they need to be interpreted and heard from the perspective of their original audience. The readings from Isaiah presume an audience that is
either struggling, in Exile or just returning from Exile. The theological motif of exile can be relevant for people today, given life's struggles.

The second reading is generally from the letter tradition of the New (or Second) Testament. The readings are semi-continuous (one week follows the previous Sunday's selection), usually from the letters attributed to Paul (mainly from 1 Corinthians in the early part of the year), though the selections for the latter part of this liturgical year are from the 'post-Pauline' tradition represented in Ephesians (and explained below), James and Hebrews.

The following background comments to these readings might, again, help to contextualise the smaller selections from this important NT collection of writings of the first century CE witnessing the faith life of the earliest Christian communities.

During Advent Year C the selection from Paul's letters in the first three weeks comes from 1 Thessalonians and Philippians. These readings highlight an affirmative aspect of Christian living which encourages and sustains. The 1 Thes. reading is one of the earliest writings of the whole New Testament and is particularly pertinent. The reading from Hebrews on the 4th Sunday of Advent is not from Paul's writing, but from a latter period seeking to highlight the central role that Jesus plays for Christians' union with God. From this perspective it accomplishes in its own way what the earlier weeks seek to do—affirm and encourage a way of life. The themes that these readings explore allow for important connections to be made with Christian life today.

At Christmas and in the post-Christmas season Year C (Holy Family, Epiphany, Baptism of Jesus), the second readings from the letters of Titus, 1 John and Ephesians are rich in theological themes that have the potential to affirm people in the midst of their struggles in their day-to-day living. God's presence, celebrated in Jesus, strengthens, affirms and assures us.

In Ordinary Time up to the Season of Lent Year C. In this time of the Liturgical calendar we revert to the conventional method of proclaiming the second readings—semi-continuous readings from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

The Gospel: In Year C the Gospel is generally from Luke (except for the 2nd Sun of Ordinary Time, when we hear a reading from John's Gospel). The writer of this Gospel is accredited with authoring also the Acts of the Apostles. These two works represent a thematic whole and should be read together, though the Liturgical readings does not usually allow for this.

Luke wrote to an urban Greek-Roman community, located outside Palestine and in a Gentile world. Scholars usually locate it in a city like Antioch in Syria (today's Antakya in modern Turkey), and date it to about 85 CE, about three generations after Jesus and his original community of Jewish disciples in Northern Palestine and Galilee.

By the time the writer of the Gospel of Luke put down into writing the stories of Jesus' words and deeds, new questions had emerged in this environment for faithful Christians. Some of these pastoral issues were most pressing. They were concerned with such concerns as: the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians sharing table communion, liturgical and ministerial adaptation, the care of the poor by those who were rich, the need to address the cultural and historical context of Luke's community and to speak authentically to the world of Luke's parishioners, the relationship and leadership of women and men in the community, the concern over faithful and relevant catechetical instruction—all these concerns still retain their importance today for Catholic Christians in Australia seeking to discover God and remaining committed and faithful to the Christian community.

The Liturgical celebration of Luke's Gospel might enable us to deepen and celebrate our discipleship of Jesus today in the light of today's local, national and international ecclesial, political and civil events.

In Advent the first two Sundays look back as well as look forward. They seek to offer a link with the Liturgical Year B that has just concluded and look forward to the Year that is about to unfold. The theme of these readings is about God's Advent: at the end of time. Therefore a more cosmic, eschatological and universal perspective dominates the writer's thought world. This helps us to understand the apocalyptic literary style of the first Sunday. The recognition of this unique literary approach prevents us from being locked into a literal proclamation of this gospel.

The Second Sunday continues this eschatological (end-time) perspective from 1st Sun of Advent. Here John the Baptist's presence, inserted into the background of world history and politics, invites us to prepare for Jesus' coming.

This consideration of the context of the big
picture’ is further reinforced in the Gospel of 3rd Sun of Advent, with John the Baptist’s preaching spelling out the social, political and religious implications of conversion and following the one soon to be born.

The 4th Sun of Advent presents a gospel-scene linked to the immediacy of the birth of Jesus. Here two female members of the one clan greet one another and one of them exalts the future mother of Jesus. As the reader soon learns she is also the preeminent faithful disciple for Luke’s community. Here she is called blessed; later she will be noted as one fruitfully contemplative of God’s word.

For Children’s Liturgy selections from the Gospel texts (Lk 21:27-28; Lk 3:1-6; Lk 3:10-14; Lk 1:39-45) would enable Ministers of the Word to explore and celebrate the key themes of encouragement, hope, joy and holiness at the children’s own level and identified in the notes below.

At Christmas and the Sundays immediately after Christmas (up to the Baptism of Jesus, but excluding Epiphany), Luke’s Gospel offers particular insight to celebrate the meaning of Jesus’ birth in our midst. Luke emphasizes the birth of Jesus and the presence of God’s Word occurring within the context of political and world history. In other words, given the reality of our cultural situation, Jesus’ presence makes a difference that is counter-cultural. The Feast of the Epiphany draws on the Gospel from Matthew, with the story of the Magi. In reading this Gospel we note that these are not three wise men (as the carols would have us believe), but they are called ‘Magi’. Recent commentators have argued that these are servants of the regal and elite, sent on mission. Though learned and scrupulous, they are representative of the poorer people in search of meaning. Matthew’s image of their consultation of the Jewish Scriptures in Jerusalem asserts the Jewish-Christian audience intended to be addressed by Matthew’s Gospel.

For Children’s Liturgy, each of the Gospels would be appropriate to help children reflect on what Jesus brings them in their world and how they are invited to imitate him. Perhaps the Gospel for the Baptism might be shortened (Lk 3:21-22) and the catechesis could help children explore the meaning of their baptism.

In Ordinary Time up to the Season of Lent, the Gospel selections, with one notable exception, are drawn from the early chapters of Luke’s Gospel, excluding the Story of Jesus’ birth (Lk 1-2) which is celebrated, naturally, at Christmas Time. The one notable exception is 2nd Sun of Ordinary Time.

On the 2nd Sun in Ordinary Time we reflect on the first ‘sign’ which Jesus performs at Cana in Jn 2:1-12. The intent of the Jn Gospel is to highlight the nature of Jesus as the one who comes to bring a sense of fullness to the rites and practices of the Jewish world, and in this setting, the rites of purification. Jesus’ deed is called a ‘sign’ by John. It points to the deeper reality as to Jesus’ identity in relationship to Judaism. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is more of a Greek-Roman figure sent to liberate and draw into community.

The Gospel from the 3rd Sun of Ordinary Time is significant. It opens with the first four verses of the Gospel proper—revealing Luke’s method and plan of writing—then skipping over the chapters about Jesus’ birth (these were already proclaimed at Christmas) we move to the Nazareth scene where Luke allows Jesus to declare who he is through a unique reading of Isaiah (3rd and 4th Sundays of Ordinary Time). The theme of Jesus as liberator and healer is palpable and shapes the rest of Luke’s portrait of Jesus.

PART TWO: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF READINGS

Nov 30: Advent 1 Jer 33:14-16 Set after the Exile (6th cent BCE). Israel will be saved and experience God as righteousness; 1 Thes 3:12—4:2 An urge to live in holiness before God and with others, to ‘abound in love.’ Lk 21:25-28,34-36. End-time sermon encouraging alertness to the coming of God in Jesus despite difficulties. Theme: ENCOURAGEMENT: In times of difficulty in the world and church, we need to hear a word of encouragement: God is present with us, delivering us through Jesus. Implications for parish life: agency of encouragement.

Dec 7: Advent 2 Bar 5:1-9 Set in 1st cent. BCE during the Jewish dispersion: Jerusalem will be honoured and its people will return to it. Phil 1:4-6,8-11. A confident expression about the Philippians’ commitment, love, insight and mission. Lk 3:1-6. In Bapt’s preaching set in context of world history and wilderness. This is the setting for the coming of the Word of God. Theme: HOPE:
God's Word is heard, received and responded to by people: Israel, the Philippians and by Luke's audience. This offers hope in a world which needs to heed this message. What do people hope for today? How is this linked to God?

Dec 14: Advent 3 Zeph 3:14-18. In a time of moral corruption and annihilation from Assyria, Zeph proclaims God's fidelity and commitment. Phil 4:4-7. God's coming brings a sense of joy, comfort and hope-filled expectation to all who struggle and trust God. Lk 3:10-18. John's message is clear: Jesus' presence demands authentic community, justice and concern for others—'good news'. Theme: JOY: God comes to this world as it exists now: frightened, threatened and anxious. God's presence in Jesus brings joy and hope to our world and experiences that sometimes do not help us recognize this presence. Joy is infectious and conquering of sadness. What is true joy for people today?

Dec 21: Advent 4 Mi 5:1-4. God is revealed to the most insignificant of tribes and places, bringing security and peace. Heb 10:5-10. Jesus comes as God's agent ('doing God's will'), and we are made holy through Jesus. Lk 1:39-45. Mary travels to visit Elizabeth, who declares Mary as mother of 'my Lord' and blessed one of God. Theme: HOLLINESS: Israel, Jesus and Mary reveal how God's holiness is evident and acting in the world. We are invited to open ourselves to this holiness at this time, as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth. What does holiness mean? How can it be expressed?

Dec 28: Holy Family 1 Sam 1:20-22.24-28 The story of the birth of Samuel. This story shapes the way Luke tells the story of John the Baptist's birth. Jn 3:1-2.21-24. We are God's sons and daughters; we shall be like God; our hearts are attuned to God in whom we abide. Lk 2:41-52. Jesus is found in the Temple, as teacher, listener and instructor. He is about God's 'business.' Theme: IMITATION or MODELLING: The story of Samuel provides a model to Luke for John the Baptist—committed prophet, attuned to God. Union with God shapes us (Jn) our hearts & influences our lives. Jesus is presented as one attuned to God. He is our model.

Jan 4: Epiphany Is 60:1-6. In a time after Exile, the people hear a message of comfort: all will gather at the place from which they have been exiled. Eph 3:2-3.5-6 God's plan, the 'mystery' is revealed in Jesus: God is for all people, even the most unexpected—cosmic communion. Mt 2:1-12 The Magi, really royal servants, taken from the poor, come to Jesus via the Jewish world and scriptures. Theme: JOURNEYING: Epiphany is the 'manifestation' of Jesus for all peoples. Each of the readings recognizes that finding him is the result of a journey. For the Israelite people (1st reading) God encourages the search, even after a period of Exile. What is our journey today?

Jan 11: Baptism of Jesus Is 42:1-4.6-7. The jubilant reading of comfort to a disconsolate people in Exile. Many powerful images here. Titus 2:11f. God's presence in Jesus enables us to live authentically. Jesus strengthens us. He expresses God's 'loving kindness' (v4)—a rich OT expression. Lk 3:15-16.21-22. John baptizes Jesus. For Luke, this is a prayer experience, through which Jesus encounters God and is confirmed in his belovedness. Theme: BELOVED: Baptism is our response to the realization of a God who overwhelmingly loves us, without condition. We are God's 'beloved' like Luke's baptized Jesus. Prayer is the moment that confirms our baptismal privilege. There is a need today for people to hear how they truly are God's beloved.

Jan 18: Sun 2 Is 62:1-5 Israel will no longer be forgotten, forsaken or made desolate. God promises a reversal. 1 Cor 12:4-11. Paul acknowledges the variety of ministries and gifts of the community, but all are united through the Spirit. Jn 2:1-12. Jesus is the sign of abundance and refreshment: the Cana story provides the context for John's message. Theme: UNEXPECTED: All the readings reflect on the power of community life—from Israel, to the Cor church, to what Jesus has to offer: superabundance in a most unexpected context and moment. Theme of reversal. How does life seem unexpected?

Jan 25: Sun 3 Neh 8:1f: After Exile, the people are reformed by Ezra and Nehemiah, through the Torah read and explained. 1 Cor 12:12-30 The Body of Christ (Church) is made up of many parts—all equally necessary and important. Lk 1:1-4; 4:14f. After the opening verses, and passing over the birth story, Jesus is shown as liberator of all. Theme: INCLUSION: Luke's interest is to reveal Jesus as one for all peoples, without exclusion. He reads from the Scriptures, like Ezra in 1st reading. The Scriptures provide the key for interpreting life.