PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

APRIL—JULY

From the Second Sunday of Easter (Year C) to the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prepared by Michael Trainor

PART ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE READINGS

The following is a brief overview of the readings of the Liturgy of the Word for major celebrations proclaimed while this issue of Compass is current. It focuses on the readings for Sundays between mid-April and late July, from the Second Sunday of Easter (Year C) to the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

1. The First reading for each Sunday, as we know, has been selected generally with the Gospel in mind. There are notable exceptions in the Sunday selections below especially with the final Sundays of the Easter Season. During this time the first reading is from the Second (‘New’) Testament and Luke’s Book of Acts. The aim of Acts is to show how the life of the Risen Jesus continues to enliven the early Christian community. This conviction reaches its liturgical highpoint in the celebration of Pentecost. The implications of these readings for our reflections on today’s church and our experience of community are most relevant. At a time when church attendance is falling and ecclesial leadership under scrutiny there is an invitation that emerges through all these readings to return to the faith conviction reflected by the early Christians in the readings: God is present and close, and desires our renewal.

Outside of Easter the June-July selections for the first reading range from Genesis (Body and Blood, and the actions of the enigmatic Melchisedek; Ordinary Time 16 and 17 with its reflection on Abraham), Deuteronomy (Ordinary Time 15, about God’s Law), 1 Kings (Ordinary Time 13, Elijah’s anointing of Elisha), and the prophetic tradition with Isaiah (Ordinary Time 14, God’s consolation of the people). There is also an outstanding reading on the Feast of the Holy Trinity (June 3) from the Book of Proverbs celebrating God’s Wisdom (Sophia).

2. The Second Reading in the present Easter selection continues from the Book of Revelation. This is a prophetic letter written to churches in west Asia Minor towards the end of the first century CE, by a Seer, John. The intention of the writer is to offer consolation and perspective to Christians struggling in their cultural situation. This is most relevant today.

The selection from Revelation that we have in Easter offers ample opportunity to reflect on the potential of Christian life in Christ.

Outside of Easter, in Ordinary Time, the lectionary returns to its usual presentation of selections from Pauline literature with semi-continuous readings. From Ordinary Time 11 to 14, the Letter to the Galatians (chapters 3 to 6) is proclaimed. Galatians is one of Paul’s most important letters. Written probably from Ephesus c 54 CE, it addresses concerns about how one can have communion with God (which Paul calls, technically ‘justification’). For Paul, rather than a legalistic theological rigorism, Jesus is the only way to this communion. He brings about a community of faith.
COMPASS

that is inclusive and non-discriminatory. This is a central feature of the letter.

In Ordinary Time 15 to 18, our attention is on Colossians 1-2. This Letter in the Pauline genre was probably written by one of Paul’s disciples, sometime in the 60s. It seeks to affirm for Christians, tempted to perform cultic and ascetic rituals to appease the cosmic forces, the place of Jesus and his authority in the universe. This is the main idea that flows over the Sundays of Ordinary Time 15 to 17 (15-29 July). Readings from Galatians and Colossians might provide alternatives to the main liturgical themes suggested by the first reading and the Gospel.


Luke’s Gospel appears on the feast of the Ascension, with its final story of Jesus’ ascension and priestly blessing of his disciples. This concludes the gospel, forming a literary frame with its beginning, and completing the unfinished blessing of Zechariah in Lk 1. For the weeks into Ordinary Time, Luke continues as the main gospel of proclamation. Its urban connection and intent to make Jesus relevant for disciples living in a Greek-Roman world of the 85s CE, make this gospel important today. Our selection, from mid-June to the end of July, concludes Jesus’ Galilean Ministry and begins the dominant section of the Gospel concerned with Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Here the writer explores key themes for a spirituality of discipleship: freedom of discipleship and its unencumbered nature (Ordinary Time 13), mission (Ordinary Time 14), its surprising outreach (Ordinary Time 15), christological focus (Ordinary Time 16), and prayer (Ordinary Time 17). All these themes continue to be important for our own communities as we seek to develop a contemporary form of discipleship that is relevant and culturally critical.

PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

April 15—Easter 2: Acts 5:12-16. The healing power of the risen Jesus continues to pervade the life of the early Jerusalem Christian community. Rev 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19. John’s apocalyptic image of the risen Jesus: ‘the first and last...the living one’ (v17). Jn 20:19-31. Jesus breathes his spirit of courage and forgiveness on to the assembled disciples. Theme—Healing. Signs of healing pervade the world: acts of kindness, the patching up of broken relationships, steps towards reconciliation. All these (and others) are signs of the presence of the risen Jesus. What signs of his presence are tangible in my community and can be celebrated this Easter day?

April 22—Easter 3: Acts 5:27-32, 40-41. Peter and John are arrested for preaching about the risen Jesus—an act which they must continue to do no matter the consequences. Rev 5:11-14. John’s apocalyptic vision of Jesus: exalted, honoured, worshipped and sharing in God’s wisdom and power. Jn 21:1-19. The concluding chapter of the gospel pulls together two key themes: discipleship love, and the importance of alertness to the risen Jesus who offers direction for the future Church. Theme—Alertness. John’s final chapter prepares the gospel audience for a new moment in its history. Alertness and attention to the risen Jesus are essential. What practical ways is that happening in our midst now? Who are those in our local communities show this kind of attentiveness?

April 29—Easter 4: Acts 13:14, 43-52. Paul recognises that his mission is to the Gentiles. Rev 7:9, 14-17. John’s apocalyptic vision of those who have suffered and remained faithful to Jesus. Jn 10:27-30. Jesus is the shepherd who knows his sheep and protects them. Theme—Shepherding God. God seeks to shepherd and look after us. Jesus is God’s loving presence to us revealed through this com-
munity. What are examples of how God’s shepherds us in our local church community?

May 6—Easter 5 Acts 14:21-27. Paul and Barnabas continue their preaching mission of encouragement and forming leaders among the Gentiles. Rev 21:1-5a. This is a delightful vision of God’s presence within the human community that establishes joy and renews creation. Jn 13:31-35. Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure, leaving them with his injunction about love. Theme—Easter Renewal: God’s life continues to renew us, as it did the early Christians (Acts), and creation (Revelation). Many local examples abound of people and situations that renew and encourage. These can be celebrated as signs of Jesus’ ongoing Easter presence.


May 20—Ascension: Acts 1:1-11. With Jesus’ departure the disciples are encouraged to continue in their active ministry in the world. They cannot simply remain gazing into the heavens Heb 9: 24f. Jesus is with God forever, acting in our interests. Lk 24:46-53. In this final Gospel scene, set on Easter day, Jesus blesses his disciples and departs physically to God. The Gospel ends on a note of joy. Theme—God’s Presence in times of apparent aloneness: Dealing with absence is one of the most painful experiences. This absence can occur when feeling alone, deserted or mourning the death of one close. Or it can occur in feeling the loss of an institution (like the church) that seems to have abandoned one. Reflection on all these experiences can open the door for renewal in God’s desire to be with us.


June 3—Holy Trinity: Prov 8:22-31. This is a hymn to God’s Sophia (wisdom), eternal, creative and active. Rom 5:1-5. Communion with God through Jesus brings peace and an authentic existence. Jn 16:12-15. Jesus’ Spirit will guide his disciples into God’s truth. Theme—God’s inner life of friendship. God’s life permeates the universe, community, our personal lives. We can easily see signs of this life, of God’s Sophia encouraging us, despite difficulties and apparent contradictions. One obvious sign of God’s Triune life is friendship.


June 17—Ordinary Time 11: 2 Sam 12:7-10.13. King David recognizes his sinfulness when confronted by the prophet Nathan. Gal 2:16. 19-21. Here is Paul’s radical statement of his faith in Jesus as the centre of his life. Lk 7:36-8:3. A powerful story of authentic discipleship, from a woman who focuses her total loving attention on Jesus. Theme—Focused on God: Nathan helps David see his need to come back to God (1 “Reading) and Jesus shows what true fidelity really consists of as demonstrated by the women (Gospel). What are some of the ways that enable us in our challenged and diverse world to focus on God? Who models this kind of practice?

June 24—Nativity of John the Baptist: Is 49:1-
COMPASS

6. The servant of God, who feels exhausted, recognises that he is called by God and has a mission to others. Acts 13:22-26. Here in a sermon from Paul (written by Luke) is a summary about Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist. Lk 1:57-66.80. The birth of John the Baptist raises questions about his future ministry: ‘What will this child turn out to be?’ Theme—The prophetic call. Baptism is the sacrament of the prophetic ministry in which all of us are invited to be involved. Like John the Baptist, we herald and identify God’s presence through Jesus in our world and lives.


July 15—Ordinary Time 15: Dt 30:10-14. Moses reminds the people that God’s Word (‘Law’), is accessible, personal and interior. Col 1:15-20. A powerful hymn to the Sophia-Jesus, celebrating his cosmic authority to reconcile all. Lk 10:25-37. A parable that subverts the traditional and expected patterns of preferential behaviour. Theme—Our World: From Colossians, Jesus’ presence imbues the whole universe. Therefore the world is good. This challenges the conventional commercial and industrial treatment of our world. It also invites into a spirit of reconciliation.

July 22—Ordinary Time 16: Gen 18:1-10. Abraham offers hospitality to unexpected and unrecognised angelic visitors, and is blessed. Col 1:24-28. The writer encourages a disposition to make God’s Word fully known, to teach through Jesus in all wisdom and bring others to genuine maturity. Lk 10:38-42. Luke offers us a snapshot of ministerial tension, to get all the work done or focus on Jesus. The encouragement is to focus on Jesus in the midst of life’s concerns. Theme—Hospitality. A life of busyness and time of upheaval can leave us diving for self-survival. The readings (1st and Gospel) encourage a disposition of hospitality practically open to others and essentially focussed on God.

July 29—Ordinary Time 17: Gen 18:20-32. God is revealed as compassionate, for giving and conversational. Col 2:6-14. The writer celebrates the communion that the baptised Christian shares with Jesus. Lk 11:1-13. This is Luke’s insight into Jesus’ teaching on prayer. Theme—Communion with God. Two readings (1st and Gospel) invite reflection on the centrality of prayer in our lives, as conversation with a God who is open. In a NT highpoint, Colossians presents Jesus as God’s tangible expression in bodily form. Both themes are important and not mutually exclusive. They invite us into communion with God through Jesus.

Congratulations to Fr Michael Trainor, awarded an AM in the 2007 Australia Day honours list for service to education, chiefly in theology and archaeology, to international and inter-faith relations, and to ecumenism.