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# PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

JANUARY — APRIL

*From the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time to the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C)*

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## 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 (late) January to April, from the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time to the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C). Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

### ***Ordinary Time 2-7 (before Lent)***

- Apart from OT 7 (with 1 Sam) the *first readings* during Ordinary Time are drawn from the prophetic tradition (Isaiah, Nehemiah and Jeremiah). As usual, all the readings are chosen thematically with a view to complement the gospel. Though this may be seen to limit their impact, it is important to reflect upon and proclaim the First Testament readings as readings addressing the Israelite people. Their theological insights are trans-temporal and trans-cultural. They still speak to us today as we seek to draw closer to God and experience the kinds of struggles similar to the original audience addressed by these readings.
- The *second reading* continues the semi-continuous selection from 1 Corinthians, Paul's letter addresses a divided, struggling and charismatic Christian community. The issues that Paul addresses in these readings resonate still with us to-

day. These concern celebration of the presence of God's spirit (OT 2, 4, 7), how to respond to those excluded from the faith life of the Christian community (OT 3), and the implications of Jesus' resurrection (OT 5, 6).

- Gospel selections over these Sundays continue to be from Luke (except for OT 2, which is from Jn 2:1-12, the wedding feast at Cana). Luke's gospel is written for a missionary-challenged faith community in a multicultural and diverse world. The chapters of the gospel over these Sundays (Lk 4-6) present the early days of Jesus' public ministry and teaching. It is important to recognise the potential trap that lurks in the gospel selection for OT 7. Jesus is not teaching a 'door-mat' style of passive discipleship, where the disciple simply turns the 'other' cheek to meet an aggressor's slap. Rather a careful analysis of the text reveals a subtle pro-active stance which subverts the reciprocal approach to aggression conventionally expected in Lk's Greco-Roman world ('You strike me, I strike you back!'). Non-violence is difficult when the cultural expectation is to return violence with violence. On this Sunday, a Eucharistic prayer from Masses of Reconciliation would be most appropriate to complement the Liturgy of the Word and its accompanying homily.

*During Lent*

The *first readings* of the Sundays of Lent enable communities to reflect on their journey of faith as echoed in the journey of Israel (with Abraham in Lent 1 and 2, Moses in Lent 3, Joshua in Lent 4, and the vision offered through Isaiah in Lent 5).

Various aspects of the Christian life important for our Lenten reflection emerge out of the *second readings*. Their focus concerns the heart of the Lenten journey, our union with God through Jesus (Lent 1, 2, 4 and 5).

The *gospels* for Lent 1 and 2 traditionally take up the story of Jesus' temptation and transfiguration. They are drawn from the gospel of the year (Luke) and allow us to reflect on our own struggles with sin and temptation, and God's desire for our transfiguration during Lent. Following the Year C gospels through to the end of Lent will unpack other appropriate Lenten themes (reconciliation in Lent 3, forgiveness and mercy in Lent 4, conversion in Lent 5).

*Year A Readings for Lent*

The Lectionary preference on the last three Sundays of Lent will always be the Year A readings with their accompanying gospel selections from John. These are wonderfully rich readings that pick up the most important theological motifs central to our journey of faith: on Lent 3, our thirst for God revealed in John's story of Jesus with the story of the woman at the well (Jn 4); Lent 4's theme of light in the story of the healing of the man born blind (Jn 9). These lead to the ultimate theme of Lent, resurrected life and freedom from Jesus as reflected upon in the story of his raising Lazarus from the grave (Jn 11). It is no wonder that these readings are so appropriate for catechumens preparing for the waters of baptism, and all of us who seek to deepen our communion with God. John's gospel for Lent 5 is the perfect precursor to Holy Week and the celebration of Easter.

*Easter Readings*

The Easter gospel (Lk 24:1-12) allows us to accompany the women to the tomb and to hear the truth of Jesus' resurrection. The women are told to 'remember' what they had experienced about Jesus in his ministry. This memory opens them up to the conviction of Jesus' resurrection and the impulse to proclaim this to other disciples. When the male disciples hear the women's message they think they are literally mad, and one of them (Peter) goes off to check out their story. That Luke deliberately retained this as part of the Easter story is instructive, especially as the official church looks for ways to enhance women's leadership, ministry and proclamatory gifts in today's faith community. Lk's gospel also permits us to lament ways the Christian community has stifled the ministry of all, especially women.

The four *Sundays of Easter* further the celebration and implications of the risen Jesus for the life of the Christian community. The *first readings* from Acts offers vignettes of the life of the Jerusalem Christian community and reveals the presence of the risen Jesus in its preaching (with Peter on Easter Sunday and Easter 3, and Paul to the Gentiles on Easter 4) and healing practice (Easter 2). The *second readings* in Easter are all taken from the Book of Revelation. This is a wonderful piece of Second Testament literature frequently avoided by preachers and misunderstood by most. The Book was written for Christians experiencing struggle, persecution and rejection in Asia Minor in the late first century. The selections over Easter offer theologically poetic (and not literal) images of Jesus' holiness (Easter 2), transcendent power and union with God (Easter 3), and God's affirmation of those who struggle faithfully in their lives (Easter 4). The *gospels* of Easter 2-4 are from John. The risen Jesus breathes his spirit of peace and forgiveness on to the frightened disciples (Easter 2), prepares the community of disciples for its future (Easter 3) and, as usually occurs on Easter 4, reveals how he is the good shepherd.

## PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

**Jan 14—Ordinary Time 2:** *Is 62:1-5*. In a time of exile and apparent abandonment, God reveals to the people of Israel that they will be God's delight. *1 Cor 12:4-11*. God's spirit permeates the Christian community, releasing spiritual gifts within it. *Jn 2:1-12*. Jesus' first sign reveals God's joy with humanity symbolised in a wedding feast that results in an extraordinary amount of wonderful wine. *Theme—Be Delighted*. The first reading and the gospel invite us to celebrate how God cherishes and delights in us. Sometimes this theological conviction is hard to come by, especially when things seem pretty tough. Today's word will help to offer another perspective.

**Jan 21—Ordinary Time 3:** *Neh 8:2-4, 5-6, 8-10*. After the Israelite exile, the temple is rebuilt, the Torah is found, and the first liturgy of the word celebrated. This is a fine picture of how the Liturgy of the Word was celebrated in every generation. *1 Cor 12-30*. Everyone, irrespective of social status, is important in the Christian household. Those most honoured are those considered socially disrespected. Now that's a challenge! *Lk 1:1-4; 4:14-21*. The first verses of Lk and then (skipping over the story of Jesus' birth) Jesus' first proclamation of his ministry are essentially about liberating human beings. *Theme—Proclaiming Freedom*. *Neh* and *Lk* both present scenes of biblical preaching, one in the story of the renewed people of Israel, another at the commencement of Jesus' public ministry. The scriptures are intended to nurture and liberate and bring their hearers a sense of happiness. This offers an opportunity to celebrate ways the Christian community continues this ministry today.

**Jan 28—Ordinary Time 4:** *Jer 1:4-5, 17-19*. The prophet is called to his mission even before birth; it is a divine commission that will succeed. *1 Cor 12:31-13:13*. Paul celebrates the Spirit's charism of love, the foundation of the life of the Christian household. *Lk 4:21-30*. Jesus' preaching is not without its critics who seek to silence him. Their God is exclusive and different from the God that Jesus exalts. *Theme—God's inclusivity*. The prophet and Jesus in today's readings reveal a God whose vision is to embrace all people. This spirit of inclusivity is difficult for religious people (like ourselves) who always think that God only responds favourably to those who think the right thing or act correctly.

**Feb 4—Ordinary Time 5:** *Is 6:1-2a, 3-89*. The prophet is overwhelmed by the vision of God's holiness and his call to the prophetic ministry. *1 Cor 15:1-11*. Paul summarises the Easter event of Jesus' resurrection and first appearances, including to himself, 'the least of the apostles.' *Lk 5:1-11*. Jesus calls Peter to follow him and 'catch alive human beings.' *Theme—God's Call to Us*. Both *Is* and *Lk* reflect on aspects of how God's calls us. Isaiah recognises God's utter holiness; a similar disposition overwhelms Peter when confronted by Jesus and says 'Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner' (*Lk 5:8*). Both readings offer an opportunity to celebrate God's call of us individually and communally.

**Feb 11—Ordinary Time 6:** *Jer 17:5-8*. The prophet urges his people to place their trust in God alone. *1 Cor 15:12.16-20*. Paul continues to reflect on the implication of Jesus' resurrection. *Lk 6:17.20-26*. The beginning of the 'Sermon on the Plain' addressed to disciples who are poor and rich. *Theme—Focussed on God*: Frequently we recognise God's call within us to allow our lives to be shaped by God. Trust (*Jer*) and recognition of how our possessions can help us draw close to God (*Lk*) are key to live focussed on God.

**Feb 18—Ordinary Time 7:** *1 Sam 26:7-9, 12-13, 22-23*. David has an opportunity to get even with King Saul, but refuses to do so. *1 Cor 15:45-49*. Paul affirms the spiritual reality of our lives. *Lk 6:27-38*. This is a potentially dangerous text (see comment above). Rather than being passive and victimised by aggressors, Jesus teaches a proactive response ('love,' 'bless,' 'pray,' 'offer,' 'give') that reveals God's mercy. *Theme—Responding to the Aggressor*: International politics is founded on revenge and tit-for-tat aggression. It is the cause of inter-racial tension, tribal fighting and wars. *1 Sam* and *Lk* promote a subversive wisdom where diplomacy and compassion become the ground rules for interaction. Both readings are most challenging today.

**Feb 25—Lent 1:** *Dt 26:4-10*. A summary of Israel's story concerning Abraham's wanderings and Israel's deliverance from Egypt. *Rom 10:8-13*. Communion with God ('being justified') is God's gift that comes through faith in Jesus. *Lk 4:1-13*. Jesus' is tempted to break fidelity with God and rely solely on his own power. *Theme—Our Story & Commitment*: *Dt* reflects on the story of Israel.

This is picked up in the gospel (Lk), where Jesus' story echoes that of Israel, in its temptations to live without God. The journey of Lent begins with a celebration of the way God has called each of us and to live guided by God.

**Mar 4—Lent 2:** *Gen 15:5-12, 17-18.* God calls Abram to make a covenant of loving commitment to him and his descendants. *Phil 3:17-4:1.* Paul envisions our true 'commonwealth' (v 20) realised in God's transforming presence. *Lk 9:28b-36.* Jesus transfigures and the disciples encounter him in a new way. *Theme—Encountering God.* The second week of Lent invites us to reflect on our encounters with God (as in Abram) and God's encounter with us (through Jesus). Whether we are like Abram, and find ourselves often wandering, or like Jesus, who finds God in prayer and becomes transformed, we seek to draw closer to God.

**Mar 11—Lent 3 for Year C:** *Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15.* God commissions Moses to lead the people from slavery. This is a wonderful story of divine encounter. *1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12.* Paul urges his audience to listen and learn from the story of Israel. *Lk 13:1-9.* Time is God's gift for healing, reconciliation and forgiveness. *Theme—Repentance.* 1 Cor and Lk provide invitations to allow this week of Lent to be one of sincere repentance and seeking forgiveness. Rather than a focus on private morality (what I have done wrong privately), forgiveness might be expressed in more global or ecological ways (what steps I can take to heal the ecological damage done to my world).

**Lent 3 for Year A.** *Ex 17:3-7.* The people complain about their thirst in the desert. God. *Rom 5:1-2, 5-8.* Paul affirms God's love for us. This becomes the cause of hope. *Jn 4:5-42.* The great story of the woman at the well who meets the source of living water, Jesus. *Theme—Thirst Quenching:* For what do we thirst? What are our deepest desires? The readings invite us in this week of Lent to renew our relationship with the source of Living Water, who satisfies us deeply.

**Mar 18—Lent 4 for Year C:** *Josh 5:9a, 10-12.* God's people enter into the land given to them. The land is God's gift and they celebrate it in a Passover. *2 Cor 5:17-21.* Our union with Jesus enables us to experience a new way of life ('the new creation'), and how to be ministers of reconciliation. *Lk 15:1-3, 11-32.* Here is one of the gospel's great and rich parables about the embracing and forgiving father, the ability to change, and the stubbornness to resist welcoming the stranger. *Theme—Coming Home.* Israel (Josh) and

the young son (Lk) experience what it is like to finally come home. How can this happen and be celebrated in this faith community?

**Lent 4 for Year A:** *1 Sam 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13* The anointing of David, the unexpected and unrecognised one, as king. *Eph 5:8-14.* Living in the light of God. *Jn 9.* This is a most dramatic story of the dawning insight about Jesus by the healed man born blind. *Theme—Light & seeing:* This week of Lent offers an opportunity to name the ways that we deeply see, interpret and know our lives and world. It is an invitation to come to the source of light, Jesus.

**Mar 25—Lent 5:** *Is 43:16-21.* The prophet's vision about God's new action on behalf of the people. *Phil 3:8-14.* Paul is totally taken up by his commitment to Jesus and desire to be with him. *Jn 8:1-11.* Jesus forgives and challenges to a change of heart those who judge and condemn. *Theme—Doing something new.* The possibility of a new life, new future and new way of being forge a link between the first reading and gospel. What is it that we would like God to do for us that could renew or refresh us? How will this be seen? What signs are there already in this community that that is taking place?

**Lent 5 for Year A:** *Ez 37:12-14.* God promises to open the graves of the dead and lead Israel back from exile with a new spirit. *Rom 8:8-11.* God's spirit possesses us. *Jn 11.* Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. *Theme—Life & resurrection:* Our readings climax the great themes of Lent in preparation for Easter – our resurrection and life. What brings us to life? What tangible signs are there that this is already happening around us?

**April 1—Passion Sunday:** *Lk 19:28-40.* The disciples welcome Jesus into Jerusalem as their King and leader. *Is 50:4-7.* God's suffering servant learns to listen to God each morning. *Phil 2:6-11.* Paul's great hymn of Jesus' self-emptying and exaltation. *Lk 22:14-23:56.* Jesus' suffers, is condemned and dies. Throughout he witnesses to God's compassion and forgiveness. *Theme—Compassion and kindness.* Lk's passion story presents us with a figure of God's beloved one who is able to respond to violence in an exalted, graceful and compassionate way. In a world of violence, Lk's passion story needs constant meditation.

**April 5—Mass of the Lord's Supper:** *Ex 12:1-8, 11-14.* Moses instructs the people how the Passover is to be celebrated. *1 Cor 11:23-26* Paul remembers Jesus' last meal with his friends before death.

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*Jn 13:1-15.* Jesus' act of foot-washing is a symbol of service and solidarity *Theme—Leadership:* Jesus is the one who leads us to God. Authentic leadership is the cry of our Church, world, community. How can tonight's celebration identify and celebrate this kind of leadership already occurring within our local, national and international communities?

**April 6—Good Friday:** *Is 52:13-53:12.* This is a final servant song reflecting on his innocent suffering for others. *Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9.* Jesus feels for us because he can 'sympathise with our weakness' (v15). *Jn 18:1-19:42* Jesus, the exalted one, suffers, and dies as innocent lamb and acclaimed king. The hour of death is the moment of exaltation, victory and community empowerment. *Theme—Victory.* God's solidarity with suffering creation and humanity is revealed in Jn's passion story of Jesus. God is victorious over death and everything that seeks to frustrate God's design.

**April 8—Easter:** *Acts 10:34a, 36-43.* Peter sums up Jesus' ministry and the meaning of 'Holy Week' for a Gentile centurion. *1 Cor 5:6b-8.* Paul wants us to celebrate the risen Jesus with the 'unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' (v 8). *Lk 24:1-12.* The women come to anoint Jesus' body, but discover the tomb empty and the two men proclaiming the Easter message: They learn that Jesus is risen and are entrusted with this message. *Theme—Easter Struggle.* This is one of the most difficult times of the year for families. Joy which pervades the gospel is also tinged with the pain and difficulty of living out the Easter proclamation: the women's message of the risen Jesus is not believed!

**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 that 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 community. What are examples of how God's shepherds us in our local church community?

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It should also be borne in mind that the *liturgical proclamation of the word of God*, especially in the eucharistic assembly, is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a *dialogue between God and his people*, a dialogue in which the wonders of salvation are proclaimed and the demands of the covenant are continually restated. On their part, the People of God are drawn to respond to this dialogue of love by giving thanks and praise, also by demonstrating their fidelity to the task of continual conversion.

—John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, May 31, 1998, ch. 3.