PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY
OF THE WORD

YEAR A

From the Nineteenth to the Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

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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 from August to October 2005 (from the Nineteenth to the Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time in Year A). Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of their source. The readings over this time offer a unique opportunity to proclaim the readings of Ordinary Time, without the intervention of Feasts, Solemnities or Seasons of the Year. We are able to trace Matthew’s Gospel over this period, given the Lectionary’s unique method of Gospel selection and the way the First Reading is chosen with the Gospel in mind. The Second Reading, as usual, follows Paul’s writings in a semi-continuous but selective fashion.

1. The First Readings allow us to proclaim selections mainly from the prophets (mainly from Isaiah, but also Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Malachi), though readings also appear from the Torah (Exodus—OT 30), and historical (1 Kings—OT 19) and wisdom (Sirach—OT 24) writings. The Book of Isaiah is frequently divided into three periods, not written by the same author but reflecting a common spirit of the prophet and dealing with different periods of Israel’s religious life around the time of the Exile. For this reason, commentators talk of First-Isaiah (Is 1-39), Second-Isaiah (Is 40-55) and Third-Isaiah (Is 56-66). Our present selections cover all three periods. First Isaiah (OT 21, 27 & 28) celebrates God’s holiness and power which shapes the destinies of peoples. It calls Israel to integrity of life and fidelity to their covenant with God. Second Isaiah (OT 25, 29) seeks to comfort the exiled people of Israel and ensure them that God is always with them. Third Isaiah (OT 20) envisages a new moment where all peoples are gathered as one on God’s holy mountain. All the prophetic writings enable present Christian communities to reflect on God’s presence in the midst of our political and religious lives. They invite us to identify God’s action in our world.

2. The Second Readings allow us to follow Paul’s theological message to three of his communities, either one that he was responsible for (Philippians, Thessalonians) or one that he was planning on visiting (Romans). In these Sundays of Ordinary Time we read Romans, from chapter 9 to the end of the letter. Paul is writing from Corinth around 55CEs and focuses on God’s promises to Israel (OT 20, 21). He encourages the Roman Christian to live authentically within their own culture, conscious of God’s presence with them (OT 22, 23, 24). The readings from Philippians (OT 25-28), written around 56 CE from Ephesus, offer an opportunity to meditate on the power of life with God and the kind of life that flows from this unity with God. Paul models and encourages the qualities of a faith-filled life
focussed on Jesus. On OT 29-31 (October 16-30) we turn our thoughts to the final weeks of the liturgical year and begin reading from the earliest writing of the New Testament. I Thessalonians. The letter was written around 50CE from Corinth and explores some of the most fundamental concerns of Christian living: need for fidelity, openness with God and hospitality.

3. The Gospel readings continue from the Gospel of Matthew. This is a Jewish-Christian gospel, written in the late first century, to a community undergoing transition, struggle and searching for how to live in its own culture, faithful to the spirit of Jesus and engaging life. Our selection covers Mt 14-23. This part of the gospel is concerned with missionary endeavour, dealing with internal division and understanding religious history. The evangelist presents a portrait of Jesus concerned about disciples who want to know how to handle conflict and develop a form of leadership that is clear and embracing of those who are excluded. The passages of Mt from OT 19-31 offer wonderful opportunities for contemporary Christian communities to reflect on their own issues: internal division, leadership and engagement with the wider society. These are the perennial and ever relevant concerns for all communities throughout history.

PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

August 7—Ordinary Time 19: I King 19:9, 11-13. The prophet experiences God in the unexpected silence of nature. Rom 9:1-5. Paul affirms the role which the Jewish people play in God’s plan of salvation. Mt 14:22-3. Jesus walks on the water, overcomes the powers that threaten to annihilate the discipled community. Peter accompanies him. Theme—God’s Presence in difficult times: Elijah experiences God’s presence in the silence of nature after the natural violence that precedes it; Jesus overcomes the violence that attempts to overcome Mt’s community represented in the boat; God’s presence never deserts the faithful disciple.

August 14—Ordinary Time 20: Is 56: 1, 6-7. Justice lies at the heart of being open to God and acting religiously. It is the source of unity. Rom 11:13-15, 29-32. Paul continues to acknowledge the role which the Jewish people have in God’s plan. Mt 15:21-28. A non-Jewish woman’s persistence pays off. Jesus blesses her and heals her daughter. Theme—God’s Attraction. Faith communities show the attraction which God has for people; everyone is on the search for God. It is revealed in people’s commitment to justice (1st reading) or their search to deal with seemingly insurmountable problems (Gospel).

August 21—Ordinary Time 21: Is 22:15,19-23. Shebna, a royal official, is removed from office and Eliakim is given authority (‘the key’) over the royal household. Rom 11:33-36. Paul celebrates God and God’s wisdom. Mt 16:13-20. Jesus is acknowledged as God’s Messiah; Peter is commissioned with leadership. Theme—Leadership and Authority: Examples abound of political and religious leadership that empowers and includes those who conventionally are excluded. This is the kind of authority envisaged in Isaiah and Mt.

August 28—Ordinary Time 22: Jer 20:7-9. The prophet recognises the struggle of the prophetic vocation and mission. Rom 12:1-2. Paul encourages total spiritual renewal that is personal and social. Mt 16:21-27. Jesus prepares his disciples for the suffering that awaits. Peter commissioned last week, becomes a stumbling block to Jesus this week. Theme—Struggle: The liturgy today offers a moment to name the ways that faithful Christians in the local community struggle. All of this is part of authentic witness of contemporary prophets and disciples.

September 4—Ordinary Time 23: Ez 33:7-9. The prophet is entrusted with the task of speaking God’s truth, even though this may be unpopular. Rom 13:8-10. Love of neighbour is the summary of the commandments. Mt 18:15-20. Jesus offers practical advice for dealing with internal tension. Ultimately, he is always present. Theme—Tensions: Faith communities will always experience difficulties and tensions. They are part of living out of God’s truth (1st reading) and the human reality of faith communities (Gospel). What are some present difficulties being encountered?

September 11—Ordinary Time 24: Sirach 27:30-
October 9—Ordinary Time 28: Is 25:6-10a. Paradise presented as a mountain feast with choice foods and wines. Phil 4:10-14, 19-20. In all that happens to him, no matter his physical or financial resources, Paul’s ultimate focus is always God. Mt 22:1-14. God’s lavish banquet is for all, ‘good and bad.’ Theme—Eucharistic Inclusiveness. The local Eucharistic celebration is a reflection of the Universal Church: How does it celebrate inclusiveness in a world of cultural diversity?

October 16—Ordinary Time 29. Is 45:1-4, 6. An unexpected non-Jewish military emperor becomes God’s agent of salvation. 1 Thes 1:1-5. Paul addresses a community with faith and openness in God. Mt 22:15-21. Jesus avoids a trap set by the religious leaders. God is the true source of all life, even political. Theme—God and Politics. An opportunity to reflect on the way God and religion has been co-opted into contemporary politics and military affairs, and offer an alternative focus: The heart of life and human community is God (1st Reading and Gospel), not the human whim for power or the seduction of privilege.

October 23—Ordinary Time 30. Ex 22:21-27. God’s injunction to attend to the poor and not oppress the resident alien. 1 Thes 1:5-10. Paul praises the Thessalonians for their hospitality and openness to God’s preached word. Mt 22:34-40. Jesus’ summary of the heart of ethical life: love of God and neighbour. Theme—Hospitality to the Stranger. The treatment of asylum seekers and the poor in our communities are the touchstone of authentic religious life. A number of positive examples from the local scene can illustrate the living out of such faith.

October 30—Ordinary Time 31. Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10. God critiques the practice and infidelity of Israel’s religious leaders. 1 Thes 2:7-9, 13. Paul offers himself as a model of care, commitment and fidelity. Mt 23:1-12. Status and privilege are not part of the life of the Christian community. Theme—Authentic Leadership: The readings (1st reading and Gospel) offer an opportunity to highlight the qualities of authentic political and religious leadership: integrity, humility and service of others.