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 October 2008 to January 2009, from the Twenty Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year A to the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year B. Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

The readings over this time are diverse for several reasons: We move towards the conclusion of readings for Year A, into the season of Advent and the beginning of Year B; we celebrate Christmas, with its associated feasts and the usual celebrations that occur over January, before we pick up the readings of Ordinary Time; we move from proclamation of Matthew’s gospel to the reading from Mark’s gospel which will generally be the principal gospel for the remainder of the liturgical year in 2009, until Advent 2010; curiously in the year of Mark, John’s gospel makes an occasional appearance; we also read from various First (Old) Testament readings chosen with the theme of the particular gospel in mind.

All these make for a challenging liturgical time as we seek to highlight helpful themes that link to each over the course of several celebrations, honour each of the readings with their unique historical and cultural contexts, and suggest how the readings might be celebrated.

It is important to remember that while the first readings are chosen with an eye to the gospel, these readings need to be respected in their own right. They are readings of the Jewish people expressing their faith conviction about God’s involvement in their lives. Rather than seeing the First Testament readings, especially during Advent, as offering prophetic statements ‘fulfilled’ in Jesus or as divine predictions about Jesus, they are better treated as declarations of faith about God’s ongoing fidelity to Jesus’ ancestors. This should be the spirit in which these readings are proclaimed and interpreted in the Christian Assembly. Advent is a particularly important moment of the liturgical year when this needs to be respected. The prophetic readings, especially from Isaiah, are not predictions about Jesus fulfilled at his birth. They are profound proclamations of faith about Israel’s God and are, from this perspective, valid in themselves.

•The Final Sundays of Year A (especially from November 2 to 23) look toward God’s ultimate coming, however this may manifest
itself. This will usually be in the death of those we love, our own ageing, and the struggle we have with health and concerns about our well-being. The need to contemplate God’s coming is no less important for us in a post-modern world, as it was for the first generation of Christians who had a particularly sharpened sense of the second coming of Jesus (sometimes called the ‘Parousia’ or ‘eschaton’). The themes of the readings allow us to reflect on the necessity of wisdom and alertness to the realities of life that surround us.

The **Feast of All Souls** (November 2) offers an opportunity for the Sunday Assembly to remember all those who have died, and especially the generations of faithful disciples who have helped to give life the local faith community. As one theologian has written, authentic Tradition is ‘the living faith of the dead.’

The final and climactic Sunday of the liturgical year A (**Christ the King**) allows us to seriously contemplate how Jesus’ leadership is revealed in contemporary discipleship and ministry. These are evident in the ways communities respond to the socially disenfranchised. From the perspective of a critical economic and social analysis of our current Australia society, this final gospel reading from Mt could be particularly pertinent and powerful.

- **Advent** ushers in the new liturgical year B, with its focus on Mk’s gospel. It also allows us to become steeped in the prophetic wisdom of the Jewish people with readings taken from Isaiah (**Advent 1-3**). These readings come from what scholars call Second (‘Deutero’) Isaiah and Third (‘Trito’) Isaiah, rather than from the historical character of the prophet himself. The historical focus of these readings is on the experience of Israel’s exile in the 6th century BCE. God promises liberation and happiness to a disconsolate people. The themes of our selections from Isaiah are most relevant to today’s Christian community.

The gospel selections from Mk continue (in **Advent 1**) where the previous liturgical year left off, with a consideration of God’s coming or ‘advent’ at the end of time and the necessity of Christian disciples to be ever sensitive and alert to this. The focus in the remaining weeks of Advent turns to the coming of Jesus and his birth.

It is this birth which determines the gospel for **Advent 4** from Luke and its explicit story of the annunciation of Jesus’ birth to Mary. Those of us from a Catholic tradition have always found this Lukan selection a wonderful affirmation of Mary’s role in the story of salvation. The focus of the passage is, however, principally on Jesus. We celebrate this in Lk’s story of birth heard at Christmas.

- **Christmas** liturgy encourages the proclamation from Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth. Here, different from Mt’s birth story of Jesus, the continual emphasis on joy, redemption, liberation and celebration offer a rich tapestry of theological motifs to explore. They are eternally relevant.

- **Sundays in January** after New Year and Epiphany pick up the systematic reading of Mk’s gospel. The themes of each gospel selection shape the choice of the first reading. In OT 3, for example, Mk’s Jesus proclaims the necessity of repentance. It is this theme which attracted the compilers of the lectionary to the story of Jonah and his repentant invitation to the people of Nineveh.

- **Gospel of Year B: Mark**: Finally, a word about the Gospel of Year B. Mk’s gospel is written for a struggling urban Roman community. The Christian house churches are divided. They seem to experience loneliness in their discipleship of Jesus around the year 70 CE. Political ill will and internal betrayal by some Christians of others to the Roman authorities does not make this an easy time of discipleship. Mark’s gospel is intended to address these serious, deep rooted and traumatic experiences: Jesus is portrayed as struggling,
abandoned and misunderstood; the disciples as uncomprehending factionalists. The stories throughout the gospel become a snapshot of Mark’s own community in its effort to be faith-ful to Jesus. For 2009, this same gospel will be able to speak powerfully, encourage and challenge Australian Christians in their discipl-eship.

PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

October 5—Ordinary Time 27. Is 5:1-7. God’s people are like a cared-for vineyard, sometimes fruitless. Phil 4:6-9. Paul offers encouragement not to worry, but live faithfully and confidently in peace. Mt 21:33-43. The parable of what happens to the servants and son of the vineyard owner is an allegory of Mt’s community: its struggles and suffering. Theme—Suffering. Mt’s Jewish Christian community sees its own story in today’s Gospel. To live with integrity and authenticity comes at a cost. Are there local and pertinent examples of this?

October 12—Ordinary Time 28: Is 25:6-10a. Paradise is presented here 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 lavishes a 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 19—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 have 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 26—Ordinary Time 30. Ex 22:21-27. God’s concern for the Israelites is 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 summarises the heart of ethical life: love of God and neighbour. Theme—Hospitality to the Stranger. The treatment of the socially for-gotten, excluded and the poor in our communities is the touchstone of authentic religious life. A number of positive examples from the local scene can illustrate the living out of such faith.

November 2—All Souls Lam 3:17-26. The writer feels deep restless, but realises God’s abiding love. 1 Cor 15:51-57. Paul celebrates Jesus’ victory over death: ‘Oh Death where is your sting?’. Mt 11:25-30. Jesus invites wearied disciples to come to him and rest in him. Theme—Grief and Consolation: Everyone is touched by death and grief. Our readings honour this experience, allow God to accompany us in this and know the consoling presence of Jesus.

November 9—Dedication of the Lateran Basilica: Ez 41:1-2, 8-8, 12. Symbolic water of life flows from the temple, the symbol of God’s presence amongst humanity. 1 Cor 3:9-11, 16-17. We are God’s living and holy building founded on Jesus. Jn 2:13-22. Jesus is zealous to preserve the sanctity of the temple, as the abode of God’s presence. Theme—God’s Abiding Presence. The Lateran is the key church of the Bishop of Rome, and the main church of Rome. It symbolises the unity of the Catholic Community throughout the world. This feast offers a local opportunity to honour the generations of past and present members who enriched our faith lives.

November 16—Ordinary Time 33: Prov 31:10f. An ancient summary of the ideal wife, industrious and wise. This reading requires careful explanation in today’s setting without reinforcing a conventional female stereotype. 1 Thes 5:1-6. Paul encourages ongoing commitment to alertness by those who are ‘children of the light.’ Mt 24:36; 25:14-30. A well known parable that begs careful study, lest economics rather than the struggle to do what is honourable and right (in the character of the third slave) is unwittingly promoted. Theme—Alertness. As the end of the liturgical year nears, the readings offer an opportunity to encourage spiritual and critical alertness to what is going on socially and ecclesially. The temptation to re-
reflect on the ‘good wife’ (first reading) or encourage the use of one’s ‘talents’ (gospel) misses the point. The focus of the liturgy is about God and openness to God’s life in our world.

**November 23—Christ the King:** Ez 34:11-12, 15-17. God promises to personally look after the people, like a shepherd for sheep. 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28. Paul celebrates the authority of the Risen Jesus who has power over all. Mt 25:31-46. The climactic parable in Mt’s gospel, of the need to care and tend those who are marginalised. **Theme—Care:** The final readings of this liturgical Year A encourage a spirit of tenderness and care, especially for those who are marginalised or feel shepherd-less. These attitudes reveal the qualities true leadership for today. Examples abound that show how ordinary people live out these qualities in our local communities.

**November 30—Advent 1 (Liturgy of Year B begins):** Is 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8. The prophet implores God to intervene in human affairs. We are like clay in the hands of the divine potter. 1 Cor 1:3-9. Paul affirms God’s active and strengthening presence in the Christian community revealed through Jesus. Mk 13:31-37. This is the first proclamation from Mark’s gospel for this new liturgical Year B (See notes above about Mk). Jesus encourages discipleship openness and alertness to God’s presence. **Theme—God’s Presence:** Advent begins with a celebration of God’s presence in human history and an encouragement for the disciple to keep watchful of this presence in its many manifestations. The liturgy offers a moment to celebrate God’s tangible presence in the local community.

**December 7—Advent 2:** Is 40:1-5, 9-11. The powerful reading celebrates God’s tender comforting presence to disconsolate people in Babylonian exile. 2 Pet 3:8-15. God is faithful and will come. This calls for real practical patience. Mk 1:1-8. John the Baptist prepares the people for the coming of Jesus. Repentance, humility and openness echo throughout. **Theme—A Comforting God.** Today’s readings reinforce the Advent conviction of God’s desire to be with and comfort every human being—a conviction in which many have lost confidence. We celebrate this comforting (not comfortable) God whom many would love to encounter. What local experiences and stories illustrate the presence of such a God?

**December 14—Advent 3:** Is 61:1-2, 10-11. God’s servant, empowered by the Spirit, will bring solace and good news to the oppressed. 1 Thes 5:16-24. Paul gives sage advice to struggling Christians: rejoice, pray, be grateful and open to God’s spirit. John 1:6-8, 19-28. The first of a few readings from John’s gospel in this year of Mk. Here, John the Baptist focuses our gaze on Jesus. He is life’s centre. **Theme—Hope:** Our liturgy is hope-filled. It counteract those pervading negative and cynical attitudes that find their way into faith and civic communities. Each of the readings provides ways in which this hope can be fostered in an Advent-graced and expectant people.

**December 21—Advent 4:** 2 Sam 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16. The writer plays on the metaphor of ‘house.’ David seeks to provide God with a worship-house, but it is God who will build the real house for David—in his descendants. Rom 16:25-27. Paul’s hymn of praise to God’s wisdom and kindness revealed in Jesus. Lk 1:26-38. The announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary. The centre-piece is that the evangelist says about Jesus: he will be great, God’s son, and rule forever. **Theme—God’s Kindness.** The image of a God essentially kind, revealed to us through Jesus, can be celebrated in this final Advent Sunday. Despite alternate messages they receive, many need to experience the face of God’s kindness turned towards them and creation.

**December 24-25—Christmas Midnight.** Is 9:2-4, 6-7. God brings light into the night of the world through the promised birth of the King’s son. Titus 2:11-14. God’s grace of liberation is revealed through Jesus. Lk 2:1-20. Jesus is born; people are attracted to him; the cosmos rejoices. **Christmas Day:** Is 52:7-10. To a people experiencing Exile, the prophet offers hope in a God who will liberate them. Heb 1:1-6. Jesus is the revealer of God. Lk 2:1-20. Jesus is born; people are attracted to him; the cosmos rejoices. **Theme—Hope through Jesus’ birth:** Jesus is born to a peasant couple, victims of taxation, in a world controlled by foreign powers. The political parallels to today could not be stronger. This birth can offer real hope, that people in their struggles and tragedies are not forgotten. In fact, God, revealed in the birth of this child, is with them.

Family: Abraham and Sarah are the foundational ancestors of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. These traditions are God’s ‘Holy Family.’ More unites than divides us. Today’s liturgy offers a moment to celebrate our universal religious unity.

January 1—New Year’s Day: Solemnity of Mary, Mother of Jesus.
Nm 6:22-27. The writer describes God’s blessing poured out upon a priestly people. Gal 4:4-7. Paul affirms Jesus’ human birth through Mary, subject to life’s limitations. Through Jesus we know that our relationship to God is the same as his. Lk 2:16-21. The shepherds come to see the child lying in a place of feeding. Theme—God’s Blessing. The first reading invites us to consider the kinds of blessings we would like God to bestow upon us, our family, friends and world.

January 4, 2009—Epiphany: Is 60:1-6. The people of God will be blest with a divine light that will attract all the nations of the earth. Eph 3:2-3.5-6. God’s gift of solidarity with humanity (‘grace’) is now affirmed and revealed, even to the most unexpected of peoples (‘Gentiles’). Mt 2:1-12. The Magi, rather than magicians, astronomers or kings, are rather royal servants who find Jesus from their observance of the heavens and their consultation of the Jewish scriptures. Theme—The Divine Quest. Every person is on a search. The ultimate search is for God. Epiphany celebrates the Christian search as disciples of Jesus. The search is discovered and clarified through meditating on our history, creation and Scripture.

January 11—Baptism of Jesus: Is 55:1-11. The prophet’s invitation is to—Come! Be quenched! Live! and Seek! 1 Jn 5:1-9. Our faith in Jesus allows God to bring us to life. Mk 1:7-11. Jesus is baptised by John in the Jordan. The heavens are ‘torn apart’ and the heavenly permeates the earth. Theme—Baptismal renewal: The first reading names the essential desires of our lives, realised in baptism and through communion with God in Jesus. As we renew our vows of baptism, we recommite our selves to care for the planet and each other.

January 18—Ordinary Time 2: 1 Sam 3:3-10.19. The young Samuel hears God calling but needs the help of another to know that it is God who calls. 1 Cor 6:13-15.17-20. Paul affirms the centrality of our physical bodies for our faith lives. Our bodies are important. We live as human beings not as angels. Jn 1:35-42. This second extract from Jn’s Gospel in the year of Mk has John the Baptiser direct his disciples to Jesus who invites them to come and stay with him. Theme—Encountering God. Friendship with God lies at the heart of everything. Samuel (first reading) hears God’s call but needs help to recognise it; John the Baptist’s disciples see Jesus but need help to follow him and time to become his followers. The readings invite our encounter with a companionable God revealed in Jesus. We, like the Baptiser’s disciples, are invited to ‘come and stay’ with him.

January 25—Ordinary Time 3: Jonah 3:1-5.10. Jonah calls on the people of Nineveh to repent, and, to his surprise, they do! 1 Cor 7:29-31. Paul ponders the larger context by which life is lived—God. Mk 1:14-20. Jesus’ first words in Mk’s gospel encourage a change of attitude (‘repent’) and an openness to God’s call (‘believe in the gospel’) revealed in Jesus. These are the key qualities for discipleship in the rest of Mk’s gospel. Theme—Openness. Both Jonah and Mark encourage a spirit of repentance. This is not the breast-beating attitude of one who should feel guilty or a permanent feeling of paranoid moral corruption. Rather ‘repentance’ (metanoia, in Mk’s Greek) is an attitude of openness to change. This is an attitude of the heart that allows God’s project (as expressed by Paul) to shape one’s life.

While scholars may have warmed to Mark in recent years, the gospel has taken rather longer to reestablish itself in wider Christian usage. True, Mark now has his ‘year’ (Year B) in the revised Sunday Lectionary of the Roman Catholic Church, which has served as a model for the lectionaries used in other traditions. But there is still some way to go if Mark’s voice is to be heard and recognised among the gospel quartet.