PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY
OF THE WORD

JANUARY to APRIL 2009

From the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of Jesus (Jan. 1) to the third Sunday of Easter (April 26)

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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 of Year B, between January and April, 2009, from the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, (Jan 1) to the Third Sunday of Easter (April 26) Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

Readings for Ordinary Time

In the readings for Ordinary Time (from January 25, OT 3) the gospel selection from Mark continues with the Jesus’ call of his first disciples and ‘the first days’ of his healing and teaching ministry. His proclamation in word and deed reveals that God is present and active amongst human beings, especially revealed in Jesus’ response to the rejected and excluded.

The first readings in February echo similar themes about God’s action amongst the Israelite people in their life struggles (Job, OT 5), purity sanctions (Leviticus, OT 6) and exilic experience (Hosea, OT 8). The second readings are drawn from Paul’s writings to the Corinthian followers of Jesus. He writes to encourage their unity (OT 6), and offer an appreciation of God’s utter commitment to humanity in Jesus (OT 7), the source of everything (OT 8). Before we begin Lent, all the readings over Ordinary Time in this early part of the year are replete with rich themes that reflect on the heart of faith in God and Jesus. Finally, another reminder about the background to Mark’s gospel, the key gospel throughout Year B: Mk’s gospel is written for a struggling urban collection of Jesus house churches possibly in Rome around 70 CE. Mark seeks to address serious issues concerned with fidelity to Jesus, internal division and religious compromise that have seen some of Mark’s Jesus householders placed under arrest, even executed. The struggles and divisions experienced by Mark’s first century community in a world of political tension and reflected in the gospel make it relevant for Australian Christians; it will encourage and challenge throughout 2009.

Readings for Lent

During Lent, the scripture readings invite particular focus as we prepare for the highlight
of the liturgical year, Holy Week.

The first readings of the first three Sundays of Lent celebrate an aspect of salvation history: God’s initiative in committing to a liberating covenant with all of the cosmos (Lent 1), Abraham’s faith (Lent 2), and God’s response to the desert wandering Israelites (Lent 3).

The second reading over these first three Sundays continue to proclaim aspects that reflect on the mystery of God: liberating love (Lent 1), total commitment to humanity (Lent 2) and God’s expression in Jesus (Lent 3). The Gospels of the first two Sundays take up the classical themes of Lent as reflected through Mark’s Gospel: Jesus’ Baptism (Lent 1) and Transfiguration (Lent 2)

The Gospel readings from John over Lent 3-5 emphasise the religious and faith-filled dynamic that comes through people’s encounters with John’s figure of Jesus. Though alternative extracts are offered (and a brief word on each is added below), the usually preferred readings are from Jn 4, Jn 9, and Jn 11. These readings are central for our reflection and celebration of Lent and touch at the most essential aspects of religious living: our thirst for God (in the story of the woman at the well, Lent 3), our need for spiritual insight into God’s life within that will deeply touch our hearts (in the story of the man born blind, Lent 4), and our search for ultimate life (the raising of Lazarus, Lent 5).

The First Testament readings (Old Testament) for Lent 3-5 explore themes linked to John’s Gospel and form part of the story of the Israelite community (water, light, life). The second readings (Rom and Eph) continue to celebrate aspects of the mystery of God reflected in Jesus.

The Central Liturgical Celebrations of Holy Week

- The two gospel readings from Passion Sunday and Easter allow us to reflect on Jesus from Mark’s perspective. These readings offer us the climax of Mark’s Gospel: Jesus, the abandoned and lonely one—isolated from his family and disciples, even experiencing abandonment from God (‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’)—enters into his suffering and death with fidelity. Nothing sways him from his commitment to God, despite abandonment.

Passion Sunday invites us to enter into Mark’s narrative of the suffering and dying Jesus, he with him and in identity with how he is misunderstood and rejected. In the Easter Gospel notice how the angelic young man points the women to the place of solitude, absence and isolation: the empty tomb: ‘He has been raised. He is not here. See / contemplate, where they laid him!’ The tomb is the symbol of emptiness and ‘nothingness.’ Its contemplation prepares for God’s act, for resurrection. In other words, for Mark’s household of disciples and our own, failure not success lays the possibility of the future and the encounter with the resurrected Jesus. When one is left with nothing, what is there left?

- This view of Mark’s Gospel at the beginning and end of Holy Week creates a contrasting frame to what occurs in the Gospel readings in the middle of Holy Week, with the Mass of the Lord’s Supper and the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion. Here John’s Gospel is the centre-piece. Rather than Mark’s solitary figure, we have John’s Jesus who is confident, aware of God’s presence and in charge of the events that surround his passion. He commissions his disciples to lead through service. The passion is the moment of victory, glorification and enthronement. It is as though, for John, the faithful reader cannot distinguish between Jesus’ death and Resurrection. They are two aspects of the one event celebrated in the Passion.
PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

Januari 1 New Year’s Day; Solemnity of Mary, Mother of Jesus. Mt 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. Is 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.

Januari 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 Guest. 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.

Januari 11 Baptism of Jesus: Is 55:1-11. The prophet’s invitation is “Come! Be quenched! Live! and Seek!” In 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 recommi the self to care for the planet and each other.

Januari 18 Ordinarv Time 2: 1 Sam 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. In 1:15-42. This second extract from Jn’s Gospel in the year of Mk has John the Baptist 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 ever-

Febuari 1 Ordinarv Time 2: St 18: 13-20. God promises the Israelis a prophet who will speak God’s word. 1 Cor 7:32-35. Paul encourages the Christian followers of Jesus to be freed from anxiety. Mk 1:21-28. This is the first of many exorcisms in Mk. Jesus confronts and defeats the power of evil resident within a religious institution. Theme—Freedom. The gospel focuses on Jesus’ intent to heal and liberate one who is possessed. This desire for liberation is also Paul’s intent for the Corinthians.

Febuari 8 Ordinarv Time 2: Job 7:1-4, 6-7. Job laments the struggle of daily life. 1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-23. Paul reflects on his mission for all. Mk 1:29-39. A daily snapshot of Jesus’ healing ministry in the opening chapter of Mk. Theme—Daily Living. Struggle, boredom and toil are part of daily living. Job reflects upon such a life and Jesus ministers healing within this context. These images, drawn from Job and Mk, provide a way of celebrating human existence, honoring people’s struggles and recognizing the possibility of God’s healing presence through the faith community.

Febuari 15 Ordinarv Time 6. Lev 13:1-2, 45-
death are paths to life with God. Who suffers and cries aloud today in our midst? Who seek to truly be alive in our communities and churches?

**April 5** Passion: Mk 11:1-10. Jesus’ disciples welcome him into Jerusalem. Is 50:4-7. God’s servant is attentive and trusts God, despite rejection and suffering. Ps 2:6-11. One of the great songs of Holy Week: Jesus is God’s servant, who chooses to be like all human beings, and God exalts him.

Mk 14:15. The climax of Mk, the passion story of Jesus’ suffering and ultimate abandonment. **Theme—Abandonment.** Jesus comes to claim his people as their leader and his leadership is one of suffering; Jesus’ who dies abandoned is able to identify with all who feel abandoned, isolated and lonely. Mk’s Jesus is not an exalted figure, but misunderstood and rejected. The passion story from Mk offers an opportunity to identify with Jesus in this week, and to be with those who experience abandonment and isolation in our world.

**April 9** The Lord’s Supper: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14. The first Passover is remembered. God delivers Israel through the blood of the Passover Lamb. 1 Cor 11:23-26. Paul reminds the divided Christians at Corinth about what lies at the heart of celebrating the Lord’s Supper. In 13:1-15. In the act of washing his disciples’ feet, John’s Jesus offers the model of active, community service. **Theme—Service.** This celebration reaches into the heart of every parish and faith community; selfless service focused on the Eucharist. How can we celebrate this happening in our midst and encourage it to deepen?

**April 10** Good Friday: Is 52:13-53:12. This is the climactic ‘servant song’ celebrating the vicarious nature of the servant’s suffering, for the welfare of all. Heb 4:14-16: 5:7-9. Jesus is compassionate High Priest, with God, who knows our sufferings and weaknesses. In 18:1-19:42. This passion narrative, unlike Mk’s, is a true celebration of victory over death. In fourteen dramatic scenes Jesus is presented as Lamb, judge, victor, source of Church’s life. **Theme—Victory:** Jesus, as the Passover Lamb who brings people to life, is victorious over death. Rather than a somber or mournful liturgy, the readings encourage a confidence in God who is able to bring victory from death. This is a much needed focus in a world preoccupied with war and retaliation.

**April 12** Easter: Feast of the Resurrection: Mk 16:1-8. This is the most important gospel proclamation in the whole year. Mark’s Jesus is resurrected and the women are encouraged to ponder the place of emptiness, the tomb. Resurrection occurs in the most unlikely setting and moment—the place of death and hopelessness.

**April 19** Easter 2: Acts 4:32-35. The power of the resurrection is evident in the fledgling Christian community of Jerusalem. 1 Jn 5:1-6. Faith in Jesus and his resurrection makes us ‘begotten by God.’ We are in tune with God and experience God’s life within. In 20:19-31. The resurrected Jesus offers his frightened disciples peace. He empowers them with authority to forgive sin. **Theme—Forgiveness.** The resurrected Jesus continues to breathe into his community today the spirit of peace and forgiveness. Where is this seen, identified and celebrated?

**April 26** Easter 3: Acts 3:13-15, 17-19. Peter’s first sermon to the Jerusalemites is a summary of the gospel of Luke (the writer of Acts) and an invitation to a spirit of ongoing ‘conversion.’ 1 Jn 2:1-5. Even sin cannot separate us from God because of Jesus’ advocacy. In 24:35-48. The risen Jesus appears into the midst of his frightened disciples and eats a meal with them. The evangelist underscores the reality of the resurrection. **Theme—Reality of Resurrection.** In Luke’s gospel, the disciples first think that they are seeing a ghost (in Greek ‘phantasma’) when Jesus appears among them. The resurrection is not a myth or invention by well-meaning believers. That Jesus rose from death is a historical truth. It is a reality that affects our being, our universe and the soul of our communities. What are some of the signs of resurrectional life in our midst? What can we celebrate?

Scripture is most alive and imbued with spiritual energy during Mass, when the word that is proclaimed is heard, understood, loved and interiorized. This presupposes great familiarity with the text which is attained only by constant reading of the word of God.

*and on the Word of God, Relatio post disceptationem, 24.*