PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

SEPTEMBER 2006 — JANUARY 2007

From the Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) to the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (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 mid-September and late January 2007, from the Twenty Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) to the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C). Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

Our readings over this period are uninterrupted by special feasts or other celebrations which displace the usual Sunday readings. We also begin a new liturgical, year C, with the focus on Luke’s Gospel.

**The Final Sundays of Year B**

*The First readings* over the remainder of Year B are drawn from a diverse range of literary genres: prophetic, historical, wisdom, apocalyptic and from the first five books of the First (‘Old’) Testament, the Torah.

- **The prophets** sought to bring God’s people back to the heart of covenantal loyalty. They continued to remind them that God was with them in difficulty, would offer them forgiveness and communion, and restore them to their land after exile. These readings also allow us to explore and celebrate the most important religious themes that at the heart of a life of faith. Key is communion with God and an open spirit to trust this God no matter what seems to happen. The prophetic readings from Isaiah in OT 24 and 29 show how such communion is possible with God’s suffering servant figure. The Jeremiah reading in OT 30 presents us with a wonderful celebratory vision of God’s restoration to a struggling people. It is a vision that is needed today.

- **The apocalyptic writing** found in the book of Daniel is proclaimed towards the end of the liturgical year when our minds think of the new year and time beyond the present. It is natural to reflect on life’s eternity as one year merges into another. Apocalyptic writing was particular to a world and time which saw God’s hand at work everywhere and in every thing. The passages from Daniel (OT 33 and Feast of Christ the King) allow us to keep our focus on God, and God’s intention for humanity. It is this big picture rather then the literalness of the images which helps us to move beyond ourselves and our present.

- **The wisdom readings** on OT 25 (Wis 2) and OT 28 (Wis 7) further lead us into a world where God’s presence was revealed in practical wisdom and attitudes that made life possible. Wisdom was God’s gift shared with human beings, but in existence before time itself. No wonder Christians saw Jesus as the tangible presence of God’s wisdom.

*Our second readings* over the final part of Year
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B (OT 27-33) principally come from the Letter to the Hebrews, addressing Jewish Christians familiar with Jewish liturgical imagery and practice. In this context, the writer presents Jesus as the quintessential Jewish high priest, close to God, human, prone to weakness, without sin and able to intercede effectively for God’s people. The power of these readings is lost to us if we are unable to connect to our Jewish roots.

The Gospel. Finally, in the remaining Sundays of the year before Advent we proclaim the last half of Mark’s Gospel which portrays Jesus as God’s suffering servant preparing for the struggle and passion that await him in Jerusalem. The disciples accompany him, uncertain of their future. The story of Bartimaeus (OT 29) is reflective of the disciples: wanting to follow Jesus, but in need of healing from a deep blindness that prevents them from really ‘seeing’ and thus comprehending Jesus’ journey. The year concludes, as it always does, allowing us to focus on what is essential in life, what is called in classical theology ‘the last things.’ These last Sundays culminate in the Feast of Christ the King (or ‘leader’).and the invitation for journeying disciples to allow Jesus to guide and teach us.

The New Liturgical Year C

When we turn to the new liturgical year C on Advent 1, we begin to hear from Luke’s Gospel and prepare for the God’s coming (‘advent’) in Jesus, particularly celebrated in his birth.

Luke’s gospel was written in the late first century CE for a Greco-Roman urban house church. This community, though cosmopolitan, seemed composed of a wide social cross section, from wealthy elite to artisans and poor. Lk addresses the wealthy to invite them to a change of heart, openness to the socially repugnant and scandalous. Lk’s portrait of Jesus mirrors the kind of attitudes which the evangelist encourages in the gospel’s audience. As we trace the figure of Jesus and the disciples throughout the liturgical year we shall notice how often meals feature. They are frequently the reason for criticisms levelled at Jesus and his followers by some religious officials. One scholar has suggested that Jesus’ scandalous meal habits encouraged the religious purists to put him to death. In other words, Jesus ate himself to death! But more of this as the liturgical year unfolds.

About Advent

As we proclaim the Advent readings, it is important to recognise that the First Testament readings from the prophets (Jeremiah, Baruch and Zephaniah) are addressed to the Israelite people in their own day, and not texts specifically about Jesus. Jeremiah (Advent 1) is writing to Jewish people in exile, promising a vision of restoration; Baruch (Advent 2) writes after the exile about God’s restorative intention for the people; Zephaniah (Advent 3) also celebrates God’s vision for Israel. These readings are not prophecies specifically about Jesus, but about the people of which he was a member. Our readings celebrate God revealed historically in this particular people confronting specific historical and religious issues. Our First Testament Advent readings are importantly scriptures that Jesus himself would have heard and reflected upon.

In Advent the first two Sundays look back as well as look forward. They seek to offer a link with the Liturgical Year B just concluded and look forward to the year that is about to unfold. The theme of these readings is about God’s Advent: at the end of time. Therefore a more cosmic, eschatological and universal perspective dominates the writer’s thought world. This helps us to understand the apocalyptic literary style of the first Sunday. The recognition of this unique literary approach prevents us from being locked into a literal proclamation of this gospel.

• The Second Sunday continues this eschatological (end-time) perspective from 1st Sun of Advent. Here John the
Baptist’s presence, inserted into the background of world history and politics, invites us to prepare for Jesus’ coming.

• This consideration of the context of the ‘big picture’ is further reinforced in the Gospel of Advent 3, with John the Baptist’s preaching spelling out the social, political and religious implications of conversion in following the one soon to be born.

• The gospel of Advent 4, which falls this year on Christmas Eve, presents a scene linked to the immediacy of the birth of Jesus. Here two female members from the same clan greet each other; one of them exults the future mother of Jesus. As the reader soon learns she is also the pre-eminent faithful disciple for Luke’s community. Here she is called blessed; later she will be noted as one fruitfully contemplative of God’s word.

At Christmas and the Sundays immediately after Christmas (up to the Baptism of Jesus), Luke’s Gospel offers particular insight to celebrate the meaning of Jesus’ birth in our midst. Luke emphasizes the birth of Jesus and the presence of God’s Word occurring within the context of political and world history. In other words, given our geo-political realities, the celebration of Jesus’ presence with us offers fresh hope.

The Sundays of January begin with the feast of Jesus’ baptism. This is an obvious moment to reflect on God’s communion with us realised sacramentally in our own baptism. The theme of the readings of this feast encourages us, through our baptismal commitment, to be agents of justice and peace to the world in which we live. The remaining Sundays of January move us into Ordinary Time. After the gospel from John in OT 2, we begin a more consistent proclamation of Luke’s gospel. In OT 3, we hear the commencement of Luke’s gospel and Jesus’ public ministry. The gospel of OT 4 reveals that Jesus’ ministry through Lk will be tested. Eventually it will lead to his death. The second reading over this month is from the powerful 1 Corinthians. This is Paul’s letter to a community deeply divided, jealous and stacked with members full of their own importance. Paul’s letter seeks to offer an alternative way of living as a Christian community, aligned to God’s spirit manifested among them.

### PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

**Sept 17—Ordinary Time 24:** Is 50:4-9. A song of God’s servant, faithful yet persecuted, who seeks God’s justice despite persecution. James 2:14-18. Faith implies loving and caring actions towards others. Mk 8:27-35. Here is the literary and thematic centre of Mk’s gospel: Who is Jesus for us? He is God’s anointed one who will suffer, be persecuted and die. Theme—Suffering. Those close to God (the servant in Is; Jesus in Mk) suffer. Fidelity to God is not without its struggles. How are members of this community examples of faithful living in the midst of suffering?

**Sept 24—Ordinary Time 25:** Wis 2:12.17-20. A person steeped in God’s wisdom will be tested and suffer. Jas 3:16—4:3. Community peace and unity is the fruit of God’s wisdom. Mk 9:30-37. Jesus offers his struggling community of disciples a wisdom that subverts convention: being last and receptive to the social ‘little ones.’ Theme—Wisdom:

All the readings today challenge conventional wisdom concerned about power, importance, status and safety. Our communities are filled with examples of those who show true wisdom.

**Oct 1—Ordinary Time 26:** Num 11:25-29. Moses teaches about the unexpected nature of God’s spirit, revealed in unpredictable people and circumstances. Jas 5:1-6. A challenging reading about wealth and its use that is still relevant today. Mk 9:38-43.45.47-48. Jesus’ teaching continues to subvert: Optimism rather than pessimism, and a preferential treatment of the little ones rather than the great ones should characterise the lives of disciples. Living out this teaching requires firm commitment. Theme—The Unexpected: God’s presence is revealed in the unexpected, in people and situations where convention expects otherwise. Examples of this unexpected presence of God abound today. Recognition of this presence invites con-
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temptation, recognition and celebration, especially at a time when many think differently and are sceptical about this divine presence.

Oct 8—Ordinary Time 27: Gen 2:18-24. God fashions the earth creature into male and female, complementary beings who fulfil each other’s need for human companionship. Heb 2:9-11. Jesus is our ‘pioneer,’ the one who goes before us in faith. Mk 10:2-16. Jesus’ teaching ensures Mk’s Roman community that those who are divorced are the victims of an oppressive social system never intended by God. Theme—Companionship: God’s original vision for human beings concerns companionship and friendship. These are the foundations for community, the desire of every human being. Marriage becomes the sacramental expression of this community, reflecting the Trinitarian life of God. Sensitive thought needs to be given to those who are single, widowed and divorced in our Christian Assembly, that the Word addressed to them today is inclusive and encouraging.

Oct 15—Ordinary Time 28: Wis 7:7-11. True wisdom is God’s most precious gift. It comes to those who are prayerful. Heb 4:12-13. God’s Word penetrates into the core of our being and opens us to God’s truth. Mk 10:17-30. Jesus’ teaching on wealth is surprising to disciples who prefer to see wealth as a sign of divine blessing. Today’s gospel is especially challenging in a world where most are poor. Theme—True Wealth. Mk’s gospel and the Book of Wisdom offer an opportunity to reflect on our personal use of wealth and the economic situation of most on our planet. A wisdom is needed on how to respect our natural resources and respond creatively and in the spirit of the gospel to alleviate poverty and suffering; local initiatives can be noted and celebrated.

Oct 22—Ordinary Time 29: Is 53:10-11. One of the four servant songs which praises God’s anointed servant who acts on behalf of others. Heb 4:14-16. Jesus knows us intimately, especially in our suffering. Mk 10:35-45. Service rather than status characterises Jesus’ ministry and, surprisingly, also his disciples. Theme—Servant Leadership. The Christian community is filled with people who offer service and leadership to others, from members of parish care groups to others involved in many non-‘church’ activities, often not noticed or celebrated. The gospel is active in our midst and revealed in the worshipping assembly.

Oct 29—Ordinary Time 30: Jer 31:7-9. God’s vision for restoration of a broken, dispersed and disconsolate people. Heb 5:1-6. Using Jewish worship language, Jesus is presented as the authentic high priest. He is one with the people he represents because Jesus, too, is ‘subject to weakness.’ Mk 10:46-52. A powerful story of the rehabilitation of a failed disciple (‘Bartimaeus’) and the power which the community has to heal, free and bring others to Jesus. Theme—Coming Home. Jeremiah and Mk reveal God’s vision for people who feel unhappy and alone on life’s journey and are wanting to ‘come home’ to be with God. Bartimaeus is Mk’s example of this and offers us an opportunity to celebrate how this is happening in our local community.

Nov 5—Ordinary Time 31: Deut 6:2-6. God’s covenant is with this present community of Israel. The emphasis is on ‘us’ not on ‘our ancestors’. The present community is rather than Israel’s ancestors is the focus of God’s action. Heb 7:23-28. Continuing the Jewish worship imagery from previous Heb readings, Jesus offers the unrepeatable sacrifice of himself to God for all people. Mk 12:28-34. Jesus teaches Mk’s community the heart of religious practice, a focus on God and love of others. Such love reveals the closeness of God’s kingdom. Theme—Faith Today. Dt seeks to remind the present audience that they are at the heart of God’s covenantal love; Jesus’ teaching in Mk reminds the gospel audience that religious life is always potentially active. It is revealed in our love of God and evident in the way we love others. Today’s readings capture the heart of faith. What examples of such relevant and lively faith practice are obvious today?

Nov 12—Ordinary Time 32: 1 Kings 17:10-16. The widow’s hospitality to the prophet Elijah in difficult times brings her great blessing. Heb 9:24-28. Jesus is in the heavenly sanctuary with God, in God’s very presence. Mk 12:38-44. Jesus highlights how the unprotected ones, here the widow, can be victimised and oppressed by a religious system that fails to liberate Theme—Religious Freedom. The two widows in today’s readings (1 Kings and Mk) are contrasting figures: One is liberated and blessed by the prophet; the other is a victim to religion. Vatican II’s document on religious freedom affirms adult Christians in their daily lives. It is a document in harmony with the intended aspirations of our readings; it could be dusted down and highlighted for our worship.

Nov 19—Ordinary Time 33: Dan 12:1-3. God (= ‘Mich-a-el’ = ‘One-like-God’ Hebrew) will pro-
tect and deliver the people from cosmic anguish and bring them to everlasting life. *Heb* 10:11-14.18. Jesus is at God’s ‘right hand,’ an image emphasising Jesus as God’s agent and sharing in God’s power. *Mk* 13:24-32. An ‘apocalyptic’ passage that emphasises Jesus’ continuing liberating presence with those who are faithful despite difficulties. Theme—God’s Apocalyptic presence. Dan and Mk presume the contemporary audience’s familiarity with apocalyptic thought. This unique form of writing does not offer a literal divine timetable for things to come, but a reassurance of God’s presence in the present struggles of human beings open to this presence. Who are those struggling around us? Who are those we know are constantly faithful to God?

Nov 26—Christ the King: Dan 7:13-14. God’s agent judges and comforts as he reveals God’s glory. *Rev* 1:5-8. A beautiful song celebrating God’s powerful, gentle and comforting presence. *In 18:33-37*. The central message in John’s passion narrative, here revealed, is that Jesus is truly King. Theme—Jesus, revealer of God’s power: The final liturgical celebration of the year traditionally spotlights Jesus as God’s agent, revealing God’s power and presence. In a world broken, uncertain and seduced by political voices focussed more on terror than the poor, this is an important celebration. It also provides an opportunity to celebrate how this community has lived out its conviction of God’s presence and Jesus’ leadership throughout the liturgical year concluding today.

NEW LITURGICAL YEAR C

Dec 3—Advent 1: *Jer* 33:14-16. God’s prophet foresees a time of peace, harmony and communion when all will live safely. *1 Thes* 3:12—4.2. Paul’s people are urged to live out their community life with love and holiness. *Lk* 21:25-28,34-36. Our first Lk reading for the new liturgical year invites an attitude of alertness to Jesus’ coming. Theme—Alertness: Advent initially encourages us to be sensitive to the many ways God comes to us. This coming happens mostly unexpectedly, and especially in pain, suffering and death. This first celebration of our year invites us to ponder God’s presence to us in all these kinds of ways.

Dec 10—Advent 2: *Bar* 5:1-9. This is a celebration of God’s delight in creation and humanity. *Phil* 1:4-6,8-11. Paul delights in the Christians at Philippi. They witness to the gospel and he encourages their ongoing discernment. *Lk* 3:1-6. Baruch’s vision finds its expression in the historical and social preparation for the birth of Jesus. Theme—God’s delight. The advent of Jesus soon to be born among us reveals God’s delight for creation and humanity. Jesus’ birth involves the whole of creation that God has blessed. This powerful theme has profound ecological implications for our faith communities. It commits us to this planet and invites us to celebrate this world and our lives as good, holy and blessed.

Dec 17—Advent 3: *Zeph* 3:14-18. The prophet announces God’s gladness with humanity renewed through God’s love. This affirmation removes judgement and offers freedom. *Phil* 4:4-7. Paul encourages joy—a deep gift from God that alleviates ‘all worry.’ *Lk* 3:10-18. Jesus’ coming invites conversion back to God. This has economic and social implications for daily living. Theme—Joy and Conversion. These two themes (joy from Zeph and Phil; conversion from Lk) are powerful and appropriate on the eve of our Christmas celebrations. Joy is God’s gift in the midst of life’s struggles; not simply the ever-smiling Christian untouched by what is happening. The kind of conversion suggested by John the Baptist is an openness to be touched and guided by God. It has practical, personal and social implications for how we live out these days in preparing for Jesus’ birth.

Dec 24—Advent 4: *Micah* 5:1-4. The smallest and most insignificant tribe will be selected by God to rule Israel. *Heb* 10:5-10. Jesus comes to do God’s ‘will.’ This ‘will’ is to reveal God’s love and kindness towards all. *Lk* 1:39-45. Mary and Elizabeth meet. And the child whom Mary carries is recognised as Lord; joy surrounds this declaration. Theme—Smallness. Micah and Lk reveal that God’s attention is focussed on the insignificant and unknown. Israel’s smallest tribe is praised; Mary, a village woman, is blessed. Who are those in our communities that are God’s ‘little people’ and reveal to us something of the presence of God?

Dec 25—Feast of the Nativity Midnight

*Is* 9:2-4, 6-7. God’s light shines on a people that walk in darkness. Their hope is in the birth of one who will usher in God’s authority and justice. *Tit* 2:11-14. God’s love for us is tangible in the birth of Jesus. Because of this we live lives that are holy. *Lk* 2:1-20. Jesus is born to a peasant couple, victims of taxation, in a world controlled by foreign powers. Theme—God’s Welcome: So many
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will crowd into our churches this night. All seek to hear a word of hope and encouragement. In the birth of a child God is imaged as helpless, childlike, and welcoming. Mistaken notions of God as vindictive or vengeful are completely overturned. This affects the way we see our world and God’s embrace of us.

Morning

_Lk 2:1-20._ The prophet reveals to an exiled people that a message of salvation will be heard and that God ultimately reigns over disaster. _Tit 3:4-7._ God’s utter love and compassion enabled Jesus to reveal God’s goodness and kindness to us. _Lk 2:41-52._ Jesus is found as the teacher in the temple, and surprises his parents. **Theme—**Surprise. Families can be communities of great love and growth; at times they are also places of difficulty and pain. No family is ever perfect. Today’s readings encourage an attitude of openness, mutual respect and forgiveness in family or community living. Thought should be given to how to celebrate those who live on their own. In Australia, at least a third of households are single unit dwellings.

_Dec 31—Holy Family: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14._ Wisdom is found in respect and care for the older members of the family. _Col 3:12-21._ Mutual love and compassion should characterise members of the Christian household. Special attention should also be given to the last verses of this reading, written at a time when subordination represented order and stability. _Lk 2:41-52._ Jesus is found as the teacher in the temple, and surprises his parents. **Theme—**Surprise. Families can be communities of great love and growth; at times they are also places of difficulty and pain. No family is ever perfect. Today’s readings encourage an attitude of openness, mutual respect and forgiveness in family or community living. Thought should be given to how to celebrate those who live on their own. In Australia, at least a third of households are single unit dwellings.

_Jan 7—Baptism of Jesus:_ _Is 42:1-4, 6-7._ God’s servant is committed to bring peace and justice on the earth. _Acts 10:34-38._ Peter declares to a Roman, non-Jewish household that God is inclusive of all people. Those who act rightly are acceptable to God. _Lk 3:15-16, 21-22._ Jesus’ baptism is a scene of prayer and communion with God. He becomes an agent of God’s spirit. **Theme—**Agent of God’s Spirit. Baptism is more than God’s recognition of someone and that person’s communion with God. It is a commitment to communal service and social justice. These aspects are found in all the readings. We are baptised to reveal God’s inclusive community. This is challenging in a world where exclusivity and prestige or favouritism permeate all sectors.

_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 with extraordinary amounts of wonderful wine. **Theme—**Be Delighted. The first reading and the gospel invite us to celebrate how God delights in and cherishes 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 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 is to be celebrated in every generation. _1 Cor 12:30._ Everyone is an important person in the Christian community. Those who are to be most honoured are those considered the most socially disrespected. Now that’s a challenging! _Lk 1:1-4; 4:14-21._ The first verses of _Lk_ and then (skipping over the story of Jesus’ birth) Jesus proclamation of his ministry. This is 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 in the Christian community. It is the foundation of its life. _Lk 4:21-30._ Jesus’ preaching is not without its critics who seek to silence him. Their God is exclusive and not the one that Jesus seems to be exalting. **Theme—**God’s inclusivity. The prophet and Jesus in today’s reading 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.