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# PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

*YEAR A and YEAR B*

*From the Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) to Ordinary Time 4 (Year B)*

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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 November 2005 (the Thirty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time in Year A) to January 2006 (Ordinary Time 4 of Year B). Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of their 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, until Advent 2006; 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 are linked 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 as offering prophetic statements 'fulfilled' in Jesus or as divine predictions about Jesus, they are more appropriately appreciated 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** (November 6 to 20) 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 final and climactic Sunday of the liturgical year A (the Universal Kingship of Jesus) 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 Australian 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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. What it says about him is what is celebrated in his birth in

the Christmas gospel, again from Luke.

**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 the Christian community a rich tapestry of theological motifs to explore, eternally relevant, but particularly important for our nation at this time.

**Sundays in January** after New Years 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; or in OT 4, Jesus brings release from one possessed. This pastoral and healing care is echoed in the first reading from Deuteronomy.

**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 snap shot of Mark's own community in its effort to be faithful to Jesus. For 2006, this same gospel will be able to speak powerfully, encourage and challenge Australian Christians in their discipleship.

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## PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

**November 6—Ordinary Time 32:** *Wis 6:12-16* God's gift of wisdom seeks to make herself known among people. *1Thes 4:13-18*. Paul addresses the sadness experienced by those who feel the deaths of others. *Mt 25:1-13*. Jesus encourages alertness always. *Theme—Wisdom:* Wisdom (first reading) is always a possibility to those in tune with God, alert to God's presence (gospel) and sensitive to what is happening globally. It is a gift which God offers.

**November 13—Ordinary Time 33:** *Prov 31:10f*. An ancient summary of the good wife, of industry and wisdom, that requires careful explanation in today's setting without reinforcing a conventional stereotype of women. *1Thes 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 also requires 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 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 20—Universal Kingship of Jesus:** *Ez 34:11-12, 15-17*. God promises to personally look after the people, like a shepherd caring 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 kind of true leadership needed today. The readings critique a political and economic pragmatism that promotes social blindness and stifles public debate or critique.

**November 27—Advent 1 (Year B begins):** *Is 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8*. The prophet implores God's intervention and presence to be revealed in the events of human history. God is like the potter. *1 Cor 1:3-9*. Paul affirms the real and active presence of God to the Christian community revealed in Je-

sus. *Mk 13:31-37*. This is the first time that Mark's gospel is proclaimed 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. Today becomes an opportunity to celebrate how God's presence is tangible in the local community.

**December 4—Advent 2:** *Is 40:1-5, 9-11*. The power of this reading is found in God's desire to comfort a disconsolate people in Babylonian exile. *2 Pet 3:8-15*. The writer assures the letter's audience that God is faithful and will come. Such conviction requires 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 coming into the lives of human beings—a conviction in which many have lost confidence. We celebrate a comforting (not comfortable) God. Many today would really like to encounter this God. Are there experiences and stories where this encounter is tangibly expressed?

**December 11—Advent 3:** *Is 61:1-2, 10-11*. God's servant, empowered by the Spirit, will bring solace and good news to the oppressed. *1Thes 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 Jn's gospel in the year of Mk. Here, John the Baptist focuses our gaze on Jesus. He is the centre of life. *Theme—Hope:* Today's readings enable our hope-filled celebration to counteract a pervading negative and cynical attitude perpetuated by some, including leaders. Each of the readings provides ways in which this hope can be fostered in an Advent-graced and expectant people.

**December 18—Advent 4:** *2 Sam 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16*. The writer plays on the image 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 annunciation of the birth of Jesus to Mary. The focus is what the writer says about Jesus: he will be great, God's son, and rule

forever. *Theme—God's Kindness.* The image of God as essential kindness, and revealed to humanity through Jesus, can be celebrated in this final Advent Sunday. Many need to experience and capture a sense of God's kindness towards them and creation, despite alternative messages that they get.

**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 reveals that a message of salvation will be heard and that God will ultimately 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.

**January 1—New Year's Day: Solemnity of Mary, Mother of Jesus.** *Nm 6:22-27.* God's blessing poured out upon a priestly people is described. *Gal 4:4-7.* Paul's affirmation of Jesus' human birth through Mary, subject to life's limitations. Through him we are able to 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 blessing of the first reading could be the heart of our celebration at the beginning of this new year. What is it that we seek from God? What is the blessing we would like God to pour upon us, our family, friends and world?

**January 8—Epiphany.** *Is 60:1-6.* The people of God will be blest with God's light and they will attract to themselves 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, kingly servants, seek out Jesus from their observance of the heavens and their consultation of the Jewish scriptures. *Theme—The Search.* Every person is on a search. The ultimate search is for God. Epiphany celebrates the Christian search through our discipleship to Jesus. The search is discovered and clarified through meditating on our history, the cosmos, the heavens and

Scripture:

**January 15—Ordinary Time 2.** *1 Sam 3:3-10.19.* The young Samuel encounters God but needs direction to truly hear God's call. *1 Cor 6:13-15.17-20.* Paul affirms the importance and centrality of physical corporeality for religious life. We live not an angelic but human existence. *Jn 1:35-42.* A second reading from Jn's Gospel in the year of Mk. Here, John the Baptist's disciples are directed to Jesus who invites them to come and stay with him. *Theme—Encountering God.* Friendship with God lies at the heart of life and discipleship. 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 Baptist's disciples, are invited to 'come and stay' with him.

**January 22—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 reminds his listeners that there is a 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 become the essential qualities of discipleship throughout the whole 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 sense of permanent moral corruption. Rather 'repentance' (*metanoia*, in Mk's Greek) is an attitude of the person who is open to change, especially of the heart, so that God's project (as expressed by Paul) can shape one's life.

**January 29—Ordinary Time 4** *Dt 18:15-20.* God promises the people a prophet who shall lead and instruct them about what is important and essential. *1 Cor 7:17, 32-35.* Paul wants his people to live without worry and happily. This spirit, determined by God, shapes every relationship. *Mk 1:21-28.* Jesus exercises his authority of healing over an unclean spirit within a religious setting. *Theme—Happiness.* The second reading offers a way of confirming that God's intention, as perceived by Paul, was to live without worry. The gospel offers a dramatic form of God's intention of human liberation through Jesus' act of exorcism. What would be the equivalent realities today that keep us locked into worry, and from which we need healing and liberation?