



Understanding the Readings & Revisions to the Lectionary

BY REV. CHRIS MONAGHAN CP

The readings are not a museum to be visited but God's living word that speak of the past, encourage and challenge us in the present, and orient us towards the future.

The Second Vatican Council was clear in stating its desire that the Christian life of the faithful would become ever more vigorous (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* §1). An important means to achieve this was providing the people of God with greater access to the Sacred Scriptures. 'The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word' (SC §51).

It was decided that revising the cycle of readings in the lectionary was the most practical way that access could be given to the extraordinary riches contained in the Old and New Testaments. Prior to the Second Vatican Council the percentage of the Old Testament used in the liturgy, excluding the psalms, was only one per cent (255 verses) and this was greatly expanded to 13.5 per cent (3378 verses). Put another way, before the Second Vatican Council Catholics never heard readings at their Sunday celebration of the Eucharist from thirty-seven Old Testament books! The only time the Old Testament was regularly used was for the Vigils of Easter and Pentecost, and for the Feast of the Epiphany. The revised lectionary remedied that situation with only three books (Obadiah, Judith and 1 Chron) not included.

The New Testament was better represented, although there was still vast room for improvement. In the pre-Vatican II Missal only 16.5 per cent of the New Testament (1309 verses) was used. This meant that alongside the book of Revelation eight apostolic letters were never used at all. As far as the gospels were concerned, not much more than thirty per cent of Matthew and John were used, three per cent of Mark, and sixteen per cent of Luke. The revised lectionary faced this challenge head on with the result that 71.5 per cent of the New Testament (5689 verses) was now incorporated. The new three-year cycle ensured that no New Testament writing was omitted and at least 85 per cent of each gospel would now be proclaimed.

The decision to ensure that we were given as much access to the sacred Scriptures created its own challenges. With only so many weeks in the year—as well as the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter with their own sets of readings, not to mention feast days, Masses in honour of saints, and the Masses for various occasions and devotions—what was to be done? It was decided that a three-year cycle of readings on the Sundays of ordinary time would enable the semi-continuous readings of the

Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Gospel of John would be used during Lent and Easter, and for a number of the major feast days.

A number of questions still needed to be addressed in terms of the choice of texts and how they were to be arranged. The revised lectionary 'aimed at giving Christ's faithful an ever-deepening perception of the faith they profess and of the history of salvation' (*General Introduction to the Lectionary* §60).

Sundays and feast days

The first reading comes from the Old Testament, the second reading from an apostle, either from Paul or one of the other apostles, and these would be completed with a gospel reading. One of the aims underlying the choices of the readings week by week is that of highlighting the unity of the Old and New Testaments and their contribution to our understanding of the history of salvation.

The semi-continuous readings taken from the gospels provide the basic framework and orientation for the choice of the first reading from the Old Testament.

All of this would be of value in itself, but knowing the connection between the Old and New Testament readings is but one part of the journey. The readings are not a museum to be visited but God's living word that speak of the past, encourage and challenge us in the present, and orient us towards the future.

It is true that the readings come from times, contexts and environments vastly different to our own; and that has to be recognised and addressed. On another level they are profoundly our story too, they are written from faith to faith.

'The word of God proclaimed in the celebration of God's mysteries does not only address present conditions but looks back to past events and forward to what is yet to come' (*General Introduction to the Lectionary* §7).

The unity between the Old Testament reading and the gospel passage for the day is emphasised

by ensuring that there is a thematic link between them. The second reading is not thematically linked since they are usually semi-continuous selections of various letters. The value of this is that we are able to follow the letters of Paul and to see their development and inner unity, as these letters address the problems and questions faced by the earliest generations of Christians.

Weekdays

The arrangement of readings for weekdays works on a two-year cycle (years A and B). The first reading is chosen from the Old Testament, or a reading from one of the letters of an apostle. The gospel readings are arranged in a single cycle that repeats every year.

Celebrations of the saints

Accompanying this Sunday and weekday cycles is a series of readings for solemnities, feasts or memorials. There is also another series of readings for the different classes of saints. These two series of readings provide a wide range of texts to choose from dealing with the theme of holiness.

Ritual Masses and masses for various occasions

Once again, many texts have been grouped together for various ritual Masses, funerals, Masses of remembrances and for many other needs and occasions, with a wide selection of texts to choose from.

Understanding the readings for the 15th Sunday of the year

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ISAIAH 55:10-11

These words compare God's word to life-giving rain that waters the earth and makes for growth—a word that never returns without bearing fruit. They provide a perfect example of the intimate connection between the Old Testament and the proclamation of Jesus as the Living Word. The words of Isaiah were written after the Exile in Babylon when God's promise to bring the

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people back to their own homeland had been fulfilled. The people of Israel had suffered much in that time of waiting, and yet the seed of hope had been planted in their hearts and now bore fruit as they re-established their homes and farms on their return.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (PSALM 64)

Psalm 64 speaks of God's gracious and tender care for the earth and it invites us to join with all creation in a response of gratitude and praise. The antiphon deftly ties the first reading to Jesus' call to be good and receptive soil in which the seed of God's word can grow.

ROMANS 8:18-23

While the reading from Romans was not chosen to thematically link with the first reading and the gospel of today, it too has much to say about hope, persistence and growth. As Paul reflected on the big scheme of things, he could see the great struggle involved in bringing God's new creation to birth. It is as though the rest of creation has been waiting for our wounded and sinful humanity to catch up with God's saving plan. Christians experience both the struggle and suffering of the present and the promise of new life as we wait in hope.

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MATTHEW 13:1-23

The parabolic discourse of Matthew chapter 13 is spread over the next three Sundays and provides a rich banquet indeed as we are invited to reflect on Jesus' parables that encourage us to be rich soil that brings forth an abundant and fruitful harvest despite the challenges before us. Today's gospel not only presents us with a striking parable and teases out its meaning, it also explains why Jesus spoke in parables and the challenge that they provide for those in every age who do not have eyes to see and ears to hear. The words of Isaiah in the first reading proclaim the life-giving nature of God's word and it should come as no surprise that Jesus drew on Isaiah's sad lament in Isaiah 6:9-10 as he reflected on those whose hearts were hardened to receive his message. In comparison, disciples are called to rejoice and wonder that what had long been promised has now come to fruition. The question remains: what kind of soil will we be?

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May every day of our lives thus be shaped by a renewed encounter with Christ, the Word of the Father made flesh: he stands at the beginning and the end, and 'in him all things hold together' (Col 1:17). Let us be silent in order to hear the Lord's word and to meditate upon it, so that by the working of the Holy Spirit it may remain in our hearts and speak to us all the days of our lives. (Verbum Domini §124)

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**SUGGESTED PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL
15TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

Celebrant:

Loving and gracious God you reveal yourself to us through your Word. Having listened to the wisdom of the Word we turn to you in prayer:

For the Pope, the Bishops and all our Church leaders:

That the Word of God continues to be a source of inspiration for them.
We pray to the Lord.

For the world:

That a spirit of openness and compassion animate the work of those who journey with the displaced and the suffering.
We pray to the Lord.

For those who experience deep tragedy:

That they are sustained and nourished by concrete gestures and works of charity.
We pray to the Lord.

For those gathered around this table:

That our hearts be opened to enable us to hear God's word and respond to Jesus' call.
We pray to the Lord.

For those who are sick and those who care for the sick:

That they know rest, peace and comfort.
We pray to the Lord.

For those who have died recently:

and those whose anniversaries we remember at this time especially
May they rest with Christ in peace.
We pray to the Lord.

Celebrant:

God of the word, we thank you for your constancy and for our blessings. Hear the prayers we offer for ourselves and for the needs of our world.
We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.