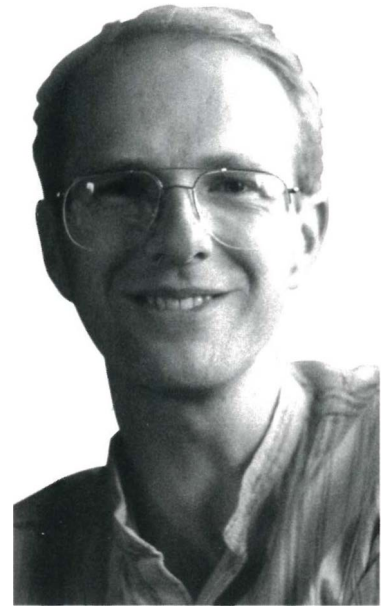


A Help to Spirituality – the Bible and the three-year lectionary

by *Mark Earey*



The use of the lectionary is now so widespread, says Mark Earey, that it is possible to say that a large proportion of Christians are likely to be reading the same passages of Scripture on any given Sunday. Do we understand what lectionaries do to the Bible, and how they can serve the Church?

Mark Earey is National Education Officer for Praxis, a Church of England organisation concerned with education and training in worship. He is based at the ecumenical Institute for Liturgy and Mission, part of Sarum College, Salisbury. Formerly minister of an Anglican / Methodist church in Kent, he is author of training packs on the three-year lectionary for Praxis and Methodist Publishing House.

When I was at theological college, a wise tutor said something that completely rocked my understanding of the Bible, worship and preaching. He said, “You may preach a great sermon, but the only part of the service guaranteed to be inspired by God is the Bible reading.”

I had always understood the importance of the Word of God in worship, but had assumed that the key point was the interpretation and proclamation of the Word in the sermon. The Bible reading was essential, but secondary to the sermon. My tutor opened up for me a new world of understanding.

I began to see that in the context of an act of worship the reading of the Scriptures was itself a significant action, both practical and symbolic. In it the Word of God was proclaimed in the corporate arena of God's people, where it was not mine, nor the preacher's, but ours. I also began to see a lectionary as not simply a list of passages for preaching but as a tool for the church's structured engagement with the Word of God.

A lectionary is part of the context in which the Word of God is heard and understood and, as such, it has an impact on hermeneutics.

The Roman Catholic Church has been using a three-year cycle of readings in its Lectionary for Mass since the 1970s.¹ American and Canadian Protestant churches adopted and adapted the three-year pattern and produced the Common Lectionary (1983) and the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL, 1992).² In 1997 the Church of England authorised a new lectionary based on the RCL. The new Methodist Worship Book (1999)³ includes the RCL. Many other churches in this country and around the world have also opted for the RCL.⁴

Some of these churches have made changes to it, but in general terms it is now possible to say that a large proportion of Christians of different denominations and in various countries are likely to be reading the same passages of Scripture on any given Sunday. Hence, this is a good time to make sure that we understand what lectionaries do to the Bible and, in particular, how this lectionary works.

Whenever we take a passage from the Bible and put it in another context we change the way it is heard and understood. This is the case when we take a passage from the Bible and use it in worship. It begins its life in its biblical

context: the part of the Bible (Old Testament or New Testament), the book of the Bible, the place within that book (including what precedes and follows it), the genre of literature into which it falls, and so on.

Over recent years, the desire to get beyond this context to unearth the history of the text and its various sources and versions (or “redactions”) has given way to a more serious engagement with the text as we have it in the canonical books.⁵ This Bible context is the starting point, but in an act of worship it will not be the finishing point. Between biblical context and the mind of the hearer, the Bible passage will go through various filters that will influence greatly the way it is finally understood and applied.

First, the passage is put into a seasonal context – including both “church” seasons and “natural” seasons. For instance, if you read, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given” in December, it is likely to be heard as referring to Christ. As part of a sermon series on Isaiah in the middle of July, it will be heard and understood differently. Its christological fulfilment will still be part of the picture, but its historical and canonical context will be more prominent in the

way it is interpreted. Similarly, the story of God testing Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22 has different echoes on Remembrance Sunday to those it has on Good Friday. Passages about death and eternal life feel different in the dark days of autumn to the way they feel in the spring.

Then, is this a service of holy communion, a non-eucharistic Word-focussed service, a baptism, an all-age service, or an outreach service? Is it morning or evening? Is the average age of the congregation sixteen or sixty? All these things will affect the way a Bible passage is heard, understood and preached on. The story of the crossing of the Red Sea will be used one way in a baptism service and another way in a sermon series on Exodus. 1 Corinthians 13 will be applied one way in a wedding service and another way in Sunday school.

The next filter is the current corporate experience of the congregation. The story of Jesus welcoming the children would be heard as an encouragement to a church planning a summer holiday club for local children, but would strike different chords in a community facing the death of a child from cancer. The existential state of the hearing community will affect the interpretation of the scripture in question.

Finally the passage reaches the filter of the individual hearers. They may be new believers or lifelong Christians. Some of them will be grieving or sad or angry; others may be experiencing times of great personal joy, growth and fulfilment. The Bible passage will be heard against this background.

In his significant book about the way the three-year lectionary affects the interpretation of the Bible, Fritz West calls this the "trajectory of lections".⁶ This process, or trajectory, is inevitable: texts need a context in order to be understood. Biblical texts often have multiple levels of meaning and are rightly approached differently in different circumstances.

Some churches assume that the local church or the particular preacher or worship leader should choose Bible readings. In other churches decisions about Bible readings are taken at a denominational, a national or an

international level. But the "trajectory" will happen whichever way the readings are chosen. Churches that base the choice of readings on a lectionary are simply doing the choosing in a long-term and very deliberate way, and in a way that shares the decision-making with the church beyond the local congregation. Lectionaries particularly engage with the first two filters: the seasonal and worship contexts.

Fritz West suggests a Protestant and Catholic divide over the way that Scripture is passed on. In the Catholic tradition Scripture is understood as passed on primarily by communal memory (that is, the public use of Scripture in worship); in Protestant denominations by written memory (that is, the printed Bible).

Catholics expect to encounter Scripture primarily by hearing it in the context of worship. Hence it tends to be heard and interpreted in a way that is christological and eucharist-centred. The writers of the New Testament expected their words to be encountered by hearing in the community of the Church. No one in the first century envisaged a situation where someone could have a personal copy of the Bible and read it alone. Encountering Scripture by hearing is inherently corporate: there have to be at least two people involved – one to speak and one to hear. Many Bible passages only make proper sense when this corporate context is understood. For instance the curious "let the reader understand" in Mark 13.14 is a direction to the person reading out loud. For the Catholic tradition, the public reading of the Scriptures is the proclamation of the Word.

Those in the Protestant traditions are more used to encountering Scripture by seeing it in the printed Bible. This has a lot to do with the convergence in the sixteenth century of religious reform and the new technology of printing. Protestants, on the whole, are much more likely to study Scripture at home and to have Bibles in the pews at church (though both are now more common in the Catholic Church). The positive side of this is that Scripture can be studied and read by all, can be better known, and is part of

home as well as church. The negative side is that Scripture is privatised – we feel we own it as individuals rather than as part of God's people.

Protestants are often suspicious of lectionaries. They instinctively look for the biblical context for a passage, and feel that a lectionary somehow comes between them and the Bible (though, as we have seen, a series of contexts will come between Bible passage and hearers however the passage is chosen). And if Protestants do use a lectionary, they tend to use it differently to Catholics: they expect to choose only one or two readings and they look for the proclamation of the Word to take place in the sermon as much as in the reading. The Protestant encounter with the Bible as book leads to a sense that the worship context for Scripture is secondary and the biblical context is primary. But it could be argued that the trajectory of lections actually begins further back, in a worship context. The recognition of some texts as being the "Word of God" (and hence the formation of the canon of Scripture) took place in the context of the corporate worship of the church, and so was prior to the experience of the Scriptures as one book.

The ecumenical three-year RCL draws on both traditions. From the Catholic tradition comes the provision of four readings (Old Testament, Psalm, New Testament and Gospel) and the assumption that the Gospel reading is key – each part of the primarily eucharistic context of Catholic worship. The lectionary is also strongly linked to the Christian year. Hence the "seasonal context" and "worship context" filters are applied consciously and clearly.

From the Protestant tradition comes a valuing of the whole Bible and of semi-continuous reading, allowing Scripture to be heard on its own terms and providing more of a biblical context for readings over a series of Sundays. In the parts of the year that are not strongly seasonal, there is the provision of a twin-track approach – one track that chooses Old Testament readings to relate to the Gospels, and the other that

Those who use the three-year lectionary need to understand how it works and plan preaching and worship in ways that “go with the flow”. Key to this is an understanding of the multi-layered approach to continuity that is inherent in its structure:

- first there will be the overarching “flavour” given by the Gospel of the year. Each of the three years of the lectionary draws on one of the synoptic Gospels (John is used in all three years around Easter). For instance, the period Advent 1998 to Advent 1999 is Year A, the year of Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew tells the story of Jesus from a particular angle, with a special emphasis on Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. How can we bring out the particular style and emphasis of Matthew in preaching, worship and music?
- then, in some parts of the year, there will be a seasonal “panorama”. This can be brought out through music and with liturgical colour as well as through the prayers, Bible readings and preaching. These seasonal panoramas will sometimes overlap each other, such as when Advent flows into Christmas.
- at any time of year there is also likely to be some continuity in the Scripture passages being followed. This will need to be reflected in the preaching and, again, some Bible books lend themselves to a particular musical focus.

In general, then, there is an emphasis on integrity across Sundays, rather than within a given Sunday. This is a challenge, particularly where worshippers come regularly, but not every Sunday. Home groups, Bible study meetings, church magazines and notice sheets can be used creatively to help people keep up with the flow of Scripture reading and preaching, and to give them background information.

No lectionary is God-given: each is a human construct (as is relying on a preacher or leader to choose Bible readings). But the three-year lectionary has much to commend it. It seeks to cover a

large proportion of the Bible; it does so in a way that preserves and expresses a good deal of the internal continuity and context of the canon of Scripture; and it engages with the whole story of salvation and the deep human sense of season and pattern within the year. On top of that, it has been extensively tested in various forms over a period of nearly thirty years.

It may not be perfect, but it looks set to serve the church for a good few years to come.

Notes

¹ *The Lectionary for Mass* was promulgated in 1969 and made mandatory for the Roman Catholic Church from 28 November 1971. For a history of lectionaries and the emergence of the three-year lectionary, see Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (The Liturgical Press, 1998).

² The Consultation on Common Texts, *The Revised Common Lectionary* (Canterbury Press, 1992). For a history of the RCL, see Horace Allen and Joseph Russell, *On Common Ground* (Canterbury Press, 1998).

³ Methodist Publishing House, 1999.

⁴ For a detailed list of churches and the way they have adopted and adapted RCL, see Horace Allen and Joseph Russell, *op cit*, pp. 59–81.

⁵ Redaction and source critical techniques continue to be used, but alongside them have grown other techniques of “canonical” criticism.

⁶ Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory – the Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionary* (The Liturgical Press, 1997).

Some of this material first was published in the CPAS “Church Leadership Magazine” No. 37 and “Worship and Preaching” magazine July-Sep 1998. It is used here with permission.