

## Liturgical, Church and context – the disaster of the *Revised Common Lectionary*

*The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) as it stands at present is a disaster. This is a strong opinion, and in what follows I wish to explore my reasons for such a conclusion in relation both to specific aspects of the form of the lectionary as used by the Anglican Church of Canada, and in relation to broader questions of the function of lectionaries.*

Walter Deller

I am not opposed as a matter of principle to lectionaries – they are a normative aspect of the way most religions handle their sacred texts, and there is considerable evidence that both Jewish communities of Jesus' time and the earliest Christian communities had regular cycles and patterns for reading the books of the Bible. My questions relate more to how a lectionary is interacting with 'specific' context, and to what expectations we might have about how a lectionary should interact with the scriptures themselves.

I pose these questions because I begin from a fundamental assumption. The reading of the scriptures in public and in private is an essential element in how the Spirit forms Christian individuals and communities to be faithful disciples and to join with God in the unfolding divine intention for creation, redemption and sanctification. (See, for instance, the fine section on scripture in the recent *Windsor Report*.) We read the scriptures as a Church because in them we meet and know the Word made Flesh, through them we are formed to love God and neighbour as partners with that Word and through their work in us, they release the Spirit into our world in ways that shatter all fetters and bonds. I think the genuine intention of those who have been part of developing the

contemporary lectionaries that have become the *Revised Common Lectionary* (in its diverse forms) has been to give the Church something valuable and helpful and good. I'm no longer convinced that it is doing us the good they may have intended to do.

### **The Anglican lectionary tradition and the dilemma of post-modernity**

I'm going to deal first with the Anglican lectionary tradition. I am an Anglican and one of the key perspectives from which I assess the lectionary is the degree to which it assists my own part of the church universal in sustaining its unique identity and tradition. Now clearly this may be an unfair question to bring to an ecumenical lectionary; the compromises in any ecumenical project are such that they will increasingly blur the diverse identities which have come together for the common purpose. The assumption behind much ecumenism seems to be that diversity is an evil thing for the Church. On the contrary, I think our diversity may be

one of the few ways in which the contemporary Church is succeeding in being faithful—it's much too easy in a McDonaldized world to imagine that God's will for creation is that everyone should eat Big Macs for Eucharist, and that Gothic arches should be replaced by Golden Arches. *The Revised Common Lectionary* certainly feeds the church on a Big Mac version of the Bible.

## Editorial

The public reading of Scripture has been a part of Christian liturgy since the very earliest days of the ancient Church. It is the bedrock upon which our faith is built and its phrases echo throughout the prayers and songs and rituals which we use week by week.

Naturally, the way in which Scripture is used in liturgy has changed as the circumstances of the Church have changed down through the years. Today, most of the mainline Christian churches use one version or other of the *Revised Common Lectionary* in choosing which portions of Scripture are used at a particular liturgy. This issue of *Liturgy Canada* begins with a forceful critique of the *RCL* by Dr. Walter Deller, Principal and Professor of Old Testament and Congregational Life at the College of Emmanuel and St. Chad in Saskatoon. Four other people who use and teach liturgy then comment on Dr. Deller's article. Walter is then given the last word in which to respond to the responders.

We have previously used this method of opening up a particular topic in *Liturgy Canada*, and we hope you find it stimulating and provocative. Often it is all too easy to simply carry on in the usual way in which we use Scripture, "the way we've always done it." We hope that this edition of *Liturgy Canada* will help you think carefully about how Scripture serves and teaches those who come to worship with you every Sunday.

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**The Rev. Canon John Wilton** is the Incumbent of St. George's Anglican Church, Willowdale, Ontario, and is a member of the executive of *Liturgy Canada*.

## Designer's note

If you are reading this, you are among a very small group of dedicated Canadian Anglicans privileged to share this fascinating debate about how we read the founding document of the Christian faith, the Bible.

As the designer of this publication since its inception some ten years ago (if the masthead is correct, this is the 41st issue) this has been the most difficult one to design. More often than not I am confronted with a collection of diverse articles. Most of these lend themselves to some sort of illustration.

In the present case no illustrations came to mind. This issue is about words, logos, The Word. It is also a thematic issue, i.e., it is about one topic. Words are what I specialize in as a designer/typographer. In book and publication design the designer has to be constantly aware that it is the content, not the typography or the design, that is important. Readability is of utmost importance. Such design has been referred to as "the quiet art." It is quiet because the first impression should not be directed toward the typography, but to the contents. So the designer has to be discreet and take a backseat, not exactly the most prominent features of my personality.

Still, the eye needs some stimulation. In a world inundated by communication, stimuli need to be provided to keep up the interest. I hope my use of words as illustrations – and as editorial comment – help you to absorb the contents of this important issue.

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**Willem Hart** is the designer of *Liturgy Canada*.

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There are two elements to the Anglican Lectionary as it stands in the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) tradition. First, there is the Eucharistic lectionary, a series of readings from the Epistles and the Gospels

for each Sunday of the Christian year, accompanied by a series of thematic collects. BCP scholars have argued cogently that this lectionary lays out a 'doctrinal' exposition of the Christian faith, designed in some degree of continuity with the tradition of the Western Church, but also to make explicit the particular theological emphases of the reformed tradition as received in the Church of England. This series of lections, reiterated on an annual basis through the cycle of the church year, sets out key elements of the faith of the church and its understanding of discipleship and the faithful life.

The second lectionary in the *Book of Common Prayer* is attached to the daily Offices, setting out two passages from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament for reading at Morning and Evening Prayer on each day of the calendar year. In this way the faithful heard the entire New Testament about twice each year, and the bulk of the Old Testament over every two-year period. The Psalms were read through in order once in the course of each month. I use the term 'the bulk' because even in the 1552 *Prayer Book* most of Leviticus and substantial other portions were omitted from the office lectionary. Thus even this early in the formation of the Anglican tradition, some portions of the Old Testament seem to be set in a secondary relationship to the rest of the canon in terms of their

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usefulness for Christian formation. This lectionary was revised again in 1662. That 1662 revision is still the authorized *Prayer Book of the Church of England*, and the prayer book of reference for the Anglican Church of Canada's Solemn Declaration of 1893.

This pattern of reading sets up a dual expectation around the interpretation of scripture. Anglicans interpret the Bible through a lens of doctrine as laid out in the chosen Eucharistic epistles and gospels, but we also read scripture in relation to the broad sweep of the entire story of God's work of creation, the election of Israel, its journey and history, the tradition of the prophets and the wisdom writers. There is a story we are supposed to know and reflect on in its entirety—and the only way we can know and assimilate that story is through a devout, devoted and daily work of reading in consecutive order through the books of the Bible. It's not just the doctrine that shapes our reading of the story, it's the entire scripture story in all its richness (and the more we know of it, its ambivalence), that enables us to interpret doctrine in the context of a changing world.

So one of the ways I assess the *Revised Common Lectionary* is the degree to which it achieves this dual end. Here we come on a snag: The *RCL* provides, in addition to a Sunday lectionary, a second, two-year lectionary setting out readings for the daily offices. Is it fair to judge the Sunday lectionary by the dual criteria? This is where we begin to come up against contextual issues that I believe now seriously affect our understanding of the

## Now it's your turn

If you have been touched, stimulated, informed, angered, inspired, confused or otherwise affected by this assessment of the *Revised Common Lectionary* we would like to help you share your opinions with others. Your responses are most welcome!

Send your responses to *Liturgy Canada* at:  
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lectionary and its function. While more of the faithful than we may imagine attempt to slog their way through the daily readings, the fact of our present context is that Sunday morning is the main church contact and exposure to the reading and reflection on scripture that most congregation members are likely to have. The implication of this is that we may need to re-imagine and recast our entire approach to the use of the scriptures in the Sunday liturgy, and in this regard, we might have to consider no less a revolution than that

of the Reformation era in its handling of the scriptures for proclamation

and exposition. However we may wish to look at our lectionaries, the main puzzle that confronts us if we wish to be faithful to our Anglican heritage of the dual ends in reading scripture—doctrine to shape our ongoing reading of scripture, and grasp of the entirety of scripture to give us subtlety and depth to apply doctrine faithfully to life in the world—is the puzzle of how to achieve the second objective: exposure to the entire story in its richness and ambiguity. Taken at its best intentions, the *RCL* appears to have attempted to combine both a doctrinal lectionary with periods of sequential reading—but at what cost? And how effectively?

### The use of the Bible in the *Revised Common Lectionary*

I include with this article a tabulation of the use of the entire Bible in the *RCL* as it appears in the *Book of Alternative Services* of the Anglican Church of Canada (2004 edition). The tabulation represents all Sunday and Saints' Days readings, as well as those for other Holy Days and for Passion week, and assumes a Vigil at which all the proposed readings are used. In other words, this tabulation represents all the scripture which would be heard by a person who attended church on every possible occasion in the entire three-year cycle. For the purposes of the following calculations, I omit the Psalms in the overall counts, since they are used differently again, and deserve independent comment. In total, the lectionary uses 5757 verses of a total of 28,641 in the entire Bible (psalms excluded). This

represents over a three-year period only 20 percent of the entire scriptures.

Over the entire three-year period, only 8.4 percent of the Old Testament is read (1740 of 20,684 verses). Only ten percent of the Torah is read, the majority of that from Genesis and Exodus, but even these samplings represent only 21 percent and 15 percent of the two books respectively. Isaiah is the most overworked book with 37 Sunday readings drawn from its 66 chapters. Even that represents only 21 percent of the entire book of Isaiah. Only seven percent of Jeremiah is read, and only two percent of Ezekiel. Of the great historical narratives in the books found in the Former Prophets (Joshua through 2 Kings) a mere 09.4 percent appears. Of the Minor Prophets, Hosea, Joel and Amos get the lion's share of readings (27, 25 and 23 respectively of a total of 416 verses). Only six verses of Jonah appear and only eight verses of Habakkuk. Obadiah, Nahum and Zechariah do not appear a single time in the lectionary. Given the degree to which Zechariah forms a backbone of allusions in the Gospel passion narratives this is a striking omission. Ten of the 38 verses of Haggai are read.

Of the remaining books, only one-third of Ruth appears and only 11 verses of Esther. Nothing appears from the Song of Songs, except for a passage offered as an option instead of a psalm. Of the 1764 verses of Chronicles not a single one is read; of the 686 verses of Ezra and Nehemiah only eight appear. From the major wisdom writings, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) is ignored completely, 62 verses (six percent) of Job appears, and 70 verses (eight percent) of Proverbs. Despite this almost complete disuse of the canonical wisdom books, the lectionary finds it necessary to turn to the deuterocanonical books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon on five occasions.

If the nugatory use of the Old Testament in the Lectionary would give cheer to the heart of a Marcionite, the use of the New Testament hardly presents a better picture. Over the three-year cycle we hear only 62 percent of Matthew, only 68 percent of the shortest gospel, Mark, only 60 percent of Luke, and a whopping 69 percent of John. In total, only 64 percent of the entire four gospels appears in the list of readings. Despite being read throughout Easter season in each year, we

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hear only 222 verses of the total 1007 in Acts. Paul gets a good run. Forty-seven percent of Romans appears—passages from Romans 8 on seven different occasions in the cycle.

One-half of 1 Corinthians shows up; chapter 13 is read in its entirety, but the succeeding chapter which discusses the appropriate use of charismatic gifts, never appears. 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and the two letters to the Thessalonians are well-sampled (ranging from 43 to 62 percent of each of their totals). Other than Philemon, from which the last few verses are inexplicably lopped off, the winner in the lectionary sweepstakes is Ephesians of which nearly three-quarters is read. Hebrews, James, 1 Peter and 1 John all run in the 40- to 60- percent range. The Second and Third Epistles of John and Jude do not appear in the canon as far as the RCL is concerned. Those concerned about growing apocalypticism may feel a pang of worry: Forty-three verses from Revelation of 404 (and 11 of the 357 verses of Daniel from the Old Testament) ensure that most preachers will never be obliged to discuss or expound these books responsibly in public worship, and that the faithful can continue to be nourished in this regard by televangelists.

In total, only 50 percent of the entire New Testament is used over the three years. The overall use of the four Gospels amounts to only 64 percent of their total text. What's happening that we can't even manage to hear the entirety of any of the gospels in their assigned year?

### Fragmentation and dissociation

The lectionary has become a confusing jumble of fragments. Very few clergy I know (even those who have gone to some trouble to try to find out) are at all clear any more on whether there is a doctrinal rationale for the readings, and if so, what it is. If my understanding is correct—that portions of the lectionary follow traditional schemes of 'doctrinally' selected

readings and other portions do not—then it would seem that an argument cannot be made that the lectionary is first and foremost doctrinal. There is clear evidence that some portions of the evidence

to highlight the latest scholarly 'focus' in scripture study. Nonetheless, when we look at how the lectionary

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are laid out in a semblance of sequential. Except by the most audacious graces of the Spirit, doctrinal and sequential rarely appear to flow together.

Moreover, where the readings suggest an attempt to be sequential, they frequently are not. So, for instance, the devout person who decided to read the Elijah-Elisha cycle during the summer, when it forms (putatively) the framework for the sequential readings from 1 and 2 Kings, would be quite confused, since the episodes selected do not follow the biblical order. Or a sequence of readings uses short excerpts so wildly, that what is heard on a series of Sundays bears almost no resemblance to the actual narrative flow of 1 and 2 Samuel or Genesis—far too much has to be omitted. Clearly, then, the choice of readings in a proposed sequential series flattens out the texture of the biblical text, renders it tame. (We should own here that this is one of the functions of doctrine—to render the God of the Bible tame, harmless and predictable. It is also one of the functions of any attempt to render the Bible into a semblance of 'great meta-narrative.')

One common complaint is that any challenging and difficult passages from the Old Testament do not appear. Certainly feminists legitimately point out that most of the difficult passages relating to women play little part in the lectionary's selection. Others might respond, with reason, that the function of the lectionary is not

tionary treats Judges, some questions become obvious. First of all, given all the book's gripping narratives of the Spirit empowering individuals for the community's deliverance, why do we hear only seven verses from Judges 4—the epic narrative version of the Deborah-Barak-Sisera episode. We do not even hear the full story of the deliverance of Israel, only its prediction. Beyond this, we might legitimately ask why the lectionary chooses the later prose version over the much earlier poem in Judges 5, a poem which some scholars have cogently argued is the literary creation of a woman?

More importantly, the readings are excessively short for any adequate comprehension of the biblical context, and are quite often made up of tiny slivers of one or more chapters linked together. In parishes where the readers read from a Bible this can lead to lengthy and bizarre pauses in mid-reading while the desperate reader stops at verse five and searches for verse 14b where they are to pick up again. Sometimes the edits appear to bear some relation to some historico-critical or redaction critical theory about the formation of the text. But this too begs the question: Since when did some twentieth-century scholar's view of what the text might have been at some point in its evolution have any bearing on what we accept as the canonical text? Quite commonly, it's thrashing around with the anomalies of the canonical text that bears the most fruit, and putting back the bits the lectionary omits often clarifies for the preacher the exegetical challenge and

# Easter

books, such as Ruth and Jonah, could aptly be read in total at a sitting and

would make much more sense than a tiny fragment.

potential of the passage.

In a cycle of 156 Sundays, why can't we even read all 87 chapters in the four gospels at least once? In fact, with a little judicious combining, we could likely succeed in reading all three synoptic gospels through twice in their year and John once in the third year. The incomprehensible though much-loved endless discourses from John could perhaps be dished out lavishly on hot summer Sundays for their soporific and incantatory effects, and what with low turnouts in most congregations during the holiday season, the risk of John being widely heard and understood as anti-Semitic would be substantially reduced.

As for the Psalms, the RCL uses more of them than its predecessor did, but this is still only 102 out of 150, and in many cases not the whole psalm but some fragment which often bears no resemblance to the form and genre of the psalm from which the compilers have snipped it. There are a few psalms we genuinely might wish to omit reading in worship (58, 109, perhaps 137). It seems to me that sorting out the entire collection of 150 over a cycle of 150 Sundays would not leave lectionary makers brain-dead.

These are simple propositions that would give us a much more comprehensive and coherent reading of the New Testament, and would remedy some of the difficulties posed by the size, scope

## ...the readings are excessively short for any adequate comprehension of the biblical context...

The same holds true for the remainder of the New Testament. Acts through Revelation includes 171 chapters of which 22 are in Revelation. Here again, a little judicious combining of shorter chapters would allow for the entirety to be read over the three-year cycle.

Dealing with the Old Testament would be a much more difficult proposition. It would be difficult to fit its 779 chapters (excluding the psalms) into the 156 Sundays of the cycle. But even if we removed the seven Sundays of Easter season for readings from Acts in each of the years, we would be left with 135 Sundays over three years. A sampling of 135 full chapters from across the Old Testament would represent roughly 17 percent of the total, a vast improvement over the 8.4 percent we now hear across the cycle. Some

and variety of the Old Testament. What I am putting forward, in effect, is that the Sunday norm becomes three full chapters from our Holy Scriptures. And yes, I am suggesting that this would add about 15 minutes of listening to readings to our normal Sunday worship. By the standards of many world religions, Christians read aloud very few of their holy books in public, and it is no wonder that others consider with mockery our sheer ignorance of, and lack of commitment to, our own foundational scriptures.

### Post-modernity and our responsibility for coherence

Whether we like it or not, we live in the world of post-modernity. Whatever most people have acquired of Christian culture is Velveeta-cheese, processed by television

and the media into illusions and sound bites. Seekers, converts or, for that matter, the aging long-time faithful, most have encountered Christianity as a series of fragments. The *Revised Common Lectionary* reiterates this experience of dissociation and raises it to the level of high art on the average Sunday. I teach at a theological college, and after hearing the week's readings at our Monday Eucharist, I am often left astounded that the student assigned to preach succeeds in making anything coherent out of them.

Post-modernity teaches us to question all meta-narratives, and all versions of the 'great story.' This is one of its healthy impetuses, although, oddly, it doesn't apply the same stringent standards to economic theory. But to develop the critical acumen required to question and deconstruct the meta-narratives first requires that we actually know what the meta-narratives and 'great stories' are. I would argue that the first job of the church is to give believers and seekers a clear acquaintance with the shape and context of that meta-narrative. This means we need to read the gospels from beginning to end again and again, and to hear not simply five or six verses but the entire chapter or unit of scripture in which given pericopes are situated.

We began our college Great Books Seminar this year by reading aloud Mark's Gospel. At the conclusion, one student expressed absolute astonishment. "I had no idea," he said, "that all those familiar quotations and all those pieces we hear in church fitted together into a complete pattern told as a story." It's all very well to wonder what a student with so little knowledge of the Bible is doing in a theological school, but this very bright and well-educated man (two prior university degrees) is not an anomaly. A class made up of 22 Lutheran, Anglican and United Church theological students, most of them beyond the first year of their program, frequently asks where to find books of the Bible, and has almost no ear for hearing the echoes and resonances among the parts of its huge chorus of scriptural voices. This is the norm among those seeking to be ordained—our future congregational leaders, pastors, priests and diocesan bishops. These are the devout and the called, and they have been de/formed by listening to the Revised Common Lectionary every Sunday for

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the past 20 years.

Some international lectionary groups are now proposing a lectionary of daily readings which would reduce the number of readings for each day from three to one, and most of those passages to a few verses. It is recommending this to make it more convenient for overworked clergy and lay people. How can we begin to imagine that this is an adequate exposure for key community leaders—let alone that it will adequately equip layfolk most of whom actually spend the greatest part of their waking hours with non-Christians?

Over and above these issues, the fragmentary pericopes of the present lectionary open up another question about how people hear and connect with what they hear. It is a

truism that most people cannot listen to more than five to ten minutes of prose without getting lost. In part, this is the result of a sound-bite world,

and presumably a skill that once existed among people can be re-cultivated with attention and intention. I would argue from over 25 years of experience of reading large portions and whole books of the Bible with groups that short pericopes, in fact, contribute to people disconnecting, and that reading passages a chapter or more in length leads people to connect with and recall more of the material. I know from my own experience that if one is distracted by anything at the beginning of the average Sunday reading, it is frequently over before one has found time to disconnect the mind from the distraction and refocus. When one reads a chapter, there are more occasions for a listener to float in and out, and more significantly, many more hooks on which to hang one's attention and interest. This is not a bad thing—in the cold winter of the modern world most Christians will profit more by having lots of sweaters and coats on the hooks in the hall than by having one carefully selected fur coat that they left behind when they walked out the church door.

**Whatever most people have acquired of Christian culture is Velveeta-cheese, processed by television and the media into illusions and sound bites.**

**Lectionary, Church and context**

The central questions I seek to raise here are not so much about the intentions of the lectionary, although as a document it is not a particularly clear witness to them. The questions are broader ones about what we are trying to do at this point in the life and history of the church as we interact with the particular cultural forms and issues of the world around us. At what point do we have to own our responsibility to work harder to inculcate in all the faithful a much richer awareness, knowledge and working grasp of our Scriptures, and the rich life and history of their originating communities of faith to which they are a witness? How might that require us to re-imagine and reconstruct our worshipping life and that part of it which is given to feeding the community from these Spirit-filled 'testimonies' to God's saving purposes?

What is the broad hermeneutic competence we seek to create among the community of the faithful, and what is the best way to accomplish that task? If lectionaries are to have a

doctrinal function, is it not impossible to create an effective ecumenical lectionary since, beyond the banalities, different branches of the Christian faith do have genuinely different approaches to doctrine, ecclesiology and to the processes by which they are derived from and connected back to the scriptures?

I am not pretending that these are easy questions—they involve long-engrained practices and aspects of our communal life about which Christians have become very casual. Others who are much more knowledgeable about the lectionary than I am will have much to say that would challenge my critique. I think the questions I pose above stand:

They are not going to go away, nor can they be solved by a little more tinkering with the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

I recognize, too, the inner irony in the questions I raise. One of the functions of lectionaries

is to create patterns of stability in the reading and interpretation of the scriptures over a long period of time—this was exactly the tremendous unifying power of the *Book of Common Prayer*. So I might equally deconstruct my own argument and ask: Is it perhaps time just to leave the lectionary alone for a few hundred years, to stop tinkering and revising, and to just get on with living with it?

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# The gift of the *Revised Common Lectionary*

A response from Kevin Flynn

Is the *Revised Common Lectionary* perfect? No, but even allowing for my friend Walter's fondness for hyperbole, I have to say that far from being a "disaster," the *RCL* is rather a great gift to the Churches, our own included.

As Walter points out, lectionaries have been with us from the time of our Jewish forebears in faith.<sup>1</sup> The *RCL* combines elements of two traditional means of organizing lectionaries: *lectio continua* – the continuous, or semi-continuous reading of biblical books as seen especially in the "ordinary" Sundays – and *lectio selecta* – selected readings which express the main themes of a feast or a season. In

both cases, however, the lectionary is a liturgical book, a ritualized form of reading from the bible. Without appreciating the liturgical principles and pastoral concerns that inform a lectionary, it is likely to be misunderstood and misused.

Before turning, however, to the *RCL* in particular, I would like to address the two other lectionaries mentioned by Walter. Both the *Book of Common Prayer* (*BCP*) and the *Book of Alternative Services* (*BAS*) have lectionaries for the daily office which over the course of the

year bring before the worshipper most of Holy Scripture. To be sure, the *BAS* permits a greater degree of latitude than does the *BCP* as to whether all of the readings are, in fact, read. Nevertheless, the scheme is there in both books. Although I would not personally favour the production of a lectionary in which only one reading is used, the question has been legiti-

mately asked whether the scheme of long, sequential readings which developed in a monastic context is really the appropriate one for contemporary people.<sup>2</sup> The question turns on whether the main goal of the daily office is familiarity with the bible or to serve as a vehicle for prayer. For my part, I look for some combination of the two goals and find the *BAS* lectionary serves as well as the *BCP*'s.<sup>3</sup>

The Sunday Eucharistic lectionary of the *BCP* is another matter altogether. Its one-year cycle is very limited. The *RCL*'s three-year cycle provides a far greater range of Scripture. Walter, and some others, however, appear to excuse the *BCP* because it offers a "doctrinal" exposition

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of the Christian faith. This claim, however, can be made only by ignoring the history of that lectionary's development. Whereas Old Testament readings were regularly part of early lectionaries, they had virtually disappeared by the seventh century in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup>

For the basic form of the Sunday eucharistic lectionary largely preserved in both the *BCP* and the Roman lectionary of 1570, we can thank the Englishman, Alcuin. As part of his service to Charlemagne, Alcuin undertook a reform of the lectionaries of his day. Briefly, he amalgamated elements from two different lectionaries, combining the epistle readings from Gallican tradition and the gospel readings from the Roman tradition. Yes, the readings for major festivals such as Christmas Day and Easter reflect the day; yet, for the most part, the Sunday readings are an arbitrary hybrid of previously unrelated

texts. Any "doctrinal" scheme is the ingenious discovery of generations of preachers attempting to find a coherence between the epistle and gospel. Given, too, that the *BCP*'s Sunday lectionary is little different from its pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic counterpart, I fail to see how we have abandoned something distinctively Anglican in favour of a non-denominational blandness.

The *RCL* and the Common Lectionary before it derive their organizing framework from the Roman Catholic Church's Lectionary for Mass (*Ordo Lectionum Missae*<sup>5</sup>). Common to all these Sunday lectionaries is the conviction that the

Sunday liturgy is not an occasion for a bible study, which I think is what Walter seems to favour, but the occasion for forming and inviting the congregation into the celebration of the Paschal Mystery. Homilies that go no further than exegetical exposition of the reading(s) fail to articulate, illuminate, point to, flow out of, the Paschal Mystery of Christ and how our lives are to be seen and lived in that light. I do not doubt that, unfortunately, too many preachers do not understand this point. The homily does not stand apart from the rest of the liturgy. It is not primarily instructional (though people may learn

from it), but is intended to exhort and encourage people to celebrate the liturgy more deeply and fully. The homily is a bridge between Baptism and Eucharist, reminding people that they are members of the ecclesia and giving them reason to give thanks.<sup>6</sup>

The festal seasons, Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter, feature readings that have been selected on the basis of correspondence between two or three of the readings. The readings of the Easter Vigil may serve as a good example of how the *RCL* works generally. The gospel is the preeminent reading and serves as pro-

clamation of and encounter with the Risen Christ. The apostolic reading attempts to illustrate how life is to be lived because of the

Risen One. The readings from the first testament, read in the context of the light of Christ in the Paschal candle, are not simply a history lesson sketching out God's dealings with God's people but are the continuation of what the risen Christ did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted all the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27).<sup>7</sup>

The Sundays following Epiphany and Pentecost are characterized by a pattern of semi-continuous organization. Here, too, the determinative principle is that Sunday is the day of Resurrection. Rather than focusing on a specific aspect of Christ, however, they lay out as fully as possible the mystery of Christ in all aspects. While we still hear only a portion of the Bible, it is astonishing to hear that three readings plus a psalm do not yet constitute sufficient doctrinal content.

That said, the *RCL* is not void of exegetical or catechetical concerns. Indeed, as Walter points out, there are occasions when particular source-critical theories intrude in ways which I, as a preacher, rue having to contend with. I question, for example, the interruption of the readings from Mark when his account of the feeding of the 5000 is followed by several weeks from John's Bread of Life discourse. I, too, would like to be able to hear in its entirety the Book of Ruth.<sup>8</sup> The

feminist critique of the Roman lectionary and the *Common Lectionary* resulted in the inclusion in the *RCL* of more texts about women, but further work in this area would be justified.

Any lectionary presupposes on the part of its hearers a prior knowledge of the overall shape and content of the Scriptures. No one doubts that such knowledge is lacking among many or even most of those at a Sunday liturgy. This reality requires vigorous catechesis, including opportunities such as the one Walter describes in which the whole of a gospel or other book is read aloud at one sitting.

The occasion for doing that, however, is not the Sunday Eucharist.

As an ecumenical lectionary, the *RCL* also provides

the opportunity for that catechesis to be done in company with other Christians. Similarly, there are many pastors who rejoice in the opportunity to prepare their homilies with preachers from other traditions. If there is a risk in diluting Anglican identity through our sitting under the same or virtually the same set of Scriptures with literally millions of other Christians Sunday by Sunday, it is a risk that I would gladly run.

The gift of the *RCL* is manifold: It presents a more generous offering of Scripture over its three years than its Prayer Book predecessor, it orients us to the Paschal Mystery and it brings Anglicans, along with countless other Christians, to be nourished at the table of the Word. It is my hope that by sharing in that Word we be led eventually to share at the Eucharistic table, as well.

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#### Footnotes

1 The Palestinian lectionary tradition reads the Torah in 154 sequential segments over a three-year cycle. The Babylonian lectionary tradition, which came to be normative, features a one-year cycle of 54 Torah segments.

2 See, e.g., George Guiver, *Company of Voices. Daily Prayer and the People of God.* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1988), 162 – 173

3 Space does not permit an examination of the *BAS's* daily Eucharistic lectionary, which is virtually identical with that of the Roman Catholic Church. Most Canadian Anglicans will not have direct experience of it. Despite the suggestion in the introductory material to the Divine Office on page 41, this lectionary is really not appropriate for use at the Office.

4 Unfortunately, the Marcionites seem to be very much with us still. Though Walter may deplore the scarcity of OT texts in the *RCL*, I think we would both deplore even more the custom in not a few places of omitting the first reading altogether in order that the service not be "too long."

5 This title can be misleading as it actually refers to six different Lectionaries: one for Sundays and Solemnities (such as Christmas, Epiphany, the Easter Triduum), one for weekday eucharists, one for Saints' days, one for special ritual occasions such as weddings and funerals, one for various occasions (for the Church, civil needs, etc.) and one for votive Masses.

6 See, e.g., Reginald Fuller, *What is Liturgical Preaching?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), p. 12ff; O.C. Edwards, *Elements of Homiletic: A Method for Preparing to Preach* (New York: Pueblo, 1982); National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (United States Conference, Inc. 1982).

7 On this point and for an excellent orientation to the lectionary, see Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 68 and passim.

8 Unfortunately, too, what we do have from Ruth tends to get supplanted on one or the other of two Sundays in Year B by the observance of All Saints.



# What is the real problem?

a response from *John Hill*

**A** generous reading of Walter Deller's essay would suggest that the real target of his critique is not so much the lectionary as those churches which persist in forms of gathering that clearly fail to make disciples. "The reading of the scriptures in public and in private is an essential element in how the Spirit forms Christian individuals and communities to be faithful disciples and to join with God in the unfolding divine intention for creation, redemption and sanctification," he writes. Although it would be easy to brush off his lectionary proposals as impossible and self-contradictory, that would be to ignore the central concerns he identifies: the abysmal decline in biblical literacy amongst Christians, our failure to cultivate an historical/biblical awareness of our originating communities of faith and the absence of hermeneutical competence.

It does seem naive, however, to imagine that reading vast quantities of scripture aloud could rectify these failures. It is surely time to ask a bigger question: What form of Christian community could free us from the sterile aspiration of sustaining a non-existent Christendom and root us in the biblical Christ?

Inasmuch as Deller's essay does seem to hang its hopes on such a naïve proposal, however, I want to point out what seem to me its inner contradictions. Deller proposes that one traditional and essential function of an Anglican lectionary is to lay out a doctrinal exposition of the faith, one that will sustain the unique identity and tradition of Anglicanism. But then he acknowledges that such a "doctrinal lens" tends to render the God of

the Bible tame, harmless and predictable, and forces the Bible into a great meta-narrative. If the *Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)* is, as he complains, a Big Mac version of the Bible, is that worse than a sectarian version of the Bible which precludes consciousness of the inner ambivalence of the scriptures? It would be fairer, I believe, to describe the *RCL* not as a Big Mac version but as a version whose doctrinal lens is essentially just the Christian calendar, a narrative approach whose focus is the Paschal Mystery. After that, anything a lectionary can do to enable us to hear the writings in their own voice, without squeezing them into a doctrinal mould, is to be welcomed; and this is certainly the aim of the version of the *RCL* adopted by the Anglican Church of Canada.

Deller's real concern, if I have correctly identified it above, is also not well served by the comparisons he draws between the *RCL* and the lectionaries of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. He is clear that his concern is the relation between a lectionary and its specific social and religious context. And the social and religious context of the Tudor prayer book is not our context! If the daily office was ever part of the formation of ordinary Christians, it is certainly not now; and so Deller is forced to demand of the Sunday readings an

effect that he attributes to the daily readings of the 1662 book. (His references to the daily office

readings of the *BAS* are a red herring; they are not part of the *RCL* anyway.)

Deller also exhibits an astonishing bias against the Fourth Gospel and its prominence in the *RCL*, which directly contradicts his insistence that the Gospels in their entirety ought to be heard in each cycle of the lectionary. (Why is 69 percent of the Fourth Gospel a "whopping" amount when we hear 64 percent

of the entire four gospels? And writing off the final discourses of John as "incomprehensible" only tells us more about Deller's bias.)

Deller also repeatedly implies

that the selectivity of the *RCL* constitutes a canon-within-the-canon (e.g., "The Second and Third epistles of John and Jude do not appear in the canon as far as the *RCL* is concerned."). But unless the whole Bible is read at every gathering, selectivity is unavoidable; and unless the lectionary stretches over many more years, some texts will be excluded. It is a fundamental misrepresentation of lectionaries to demand that they leave nothing out. It is fairer to see a lectionary as a church's first draft of a biblical hermeneutic.

Finally, we must ask whether the lectionary itself is the only place to address the legitimate and urgent concerns that Deller identifies. Clearly the *RCL* design assumes (rightly or wrongly) that hearers have a basic familiarity, at the least, with the biblical narrative. The Old Testament selections for the season of Lent offer a good example of the problem: Brief episodes that carry us across the whole sweep of Israel's experience from the patriarchs to the exile are meaningless if the hearer cannot locate each of them within a larger narrative. The question, therefore, is "How will hearers be provided with this larger narrative?" One of the tasks of a preacher is clearly to sketch in this larger picture, and to make the literary and thematic connections with the rest of scripture. But the quaint old notion that

**What form of Christian community could free us from the sterile aspiration of sustaining a non-existent Christendom, and root us in the biblical Christ?**

erile

...anything a lectionary can do to enable us to hear the writings in their own voice, without squeezing them into a doctrinal mould, is to be welcomed

‘an hour at church’ can form and sustain disciples is the real problem; the lectionary itself is not.

**John Hill** is Incumbent of the Parish of St. Augustine of Canterbury in Toronto and a member of the Liturgy Canada Executive.

## The ‘already but not yet’ *Revised Common Lectionary* a response from *Richard Leggett*

**P**rofessor Deller’s critique of the *Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)* voices concerns that have been raised at various times and in various locales regarding the three-year lectionary. I welcome his observations even though I do not share his point of view that the RCL is “a disaster.” I suggest that a mathematical analysis comparing the number of verses in the Holy Scriptures with those in the lectionary is too blunt an instrument that does not take into consideration issues of genre, relevance and the integrity of scriptural pericopes. The arbitrary omission of the psalms from Professor Deller’s calculations is unfortunate given that one of the significant advantages of the RCL and its predecessors is the recovery of the psalms in the eucharistic worship of the church.

Let me continue my response by making a few points.

### **1) No lectionary is perfect because it represents a faithful compromise between what should be done and what can be done.**

The eucharistic lectionary inherited by the Anglican reformers and tinkered with for 400 years contained a basic flaw that scholars of the Hebrew Bible have noted repeatedly: the use of the Hebrew Bible primarily, if not exclusively, as a ‘type’ pointing to the full revelation of God contained in the New Testament. This use of the Hebrew Bible contributes to the ongoing caricature of Judaism and to the implicit neo-Marcionism that pervades the attitudes of many contemporary Christians (Hebrew God = bad; Christian God = good).

The 1969 *Ordo Lectionae Missae*, the Roman Catholic progenitor of the RCL *Revised Common Lectionary*, attempted to remedy this, but only in part. The lec-

tionary continued to build on the reading from the canonical gospel as the foundation and a reading from the Hebrew Bible was chosen that illustrated or complemented the gospel reading. The psalm was chosen in reference to the Hebrew Bible reading and the epistle, in ordinary time, was a semi-continuous reading from the canonical epistles and Revelation. During Easter the first reading from the Hebrew Bible was replaced by a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. With slight revision, this lectionary came to be used in the 1970s among non-Roman Catholic communions in North America.

This approach was criticized by many scholars of the Hebrew Bible and the

### **Poor workmanship is not usually the fault of the tool but of the one who uses the tool.**

Common Lectionary, an ecumenical revision of *Ordo Lectionae Missae*, tried to balance these concerns by constructing a lectionary that was both typological and semi-continuous. From Ash Wednesday to Trinity Sunday and from the Reign of Christ to the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the *Common Lectionary* is, to a lesser or greater degree, typological or thematic, the gospel reading setting the stage for the propers. From the Second Sunday after Pentecost until the Sunday before the Reign of Christ, all three readings are semi-continuous, the psalm continuing to be related to the first reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. In this form, the lectionary came to be adopted for *The Book of Alternative Services (BAS)*.

However, there are always those who wish a king like other nations. Some Lutherans and Episcopalians were critical of the semi-continuous readings in ordinary time. This critique, as well as concerns from feminist scholars and from scholars of the Psalms, resulted in a further revision. Hence, the *Revised Common Lectionary* came into being with two options: (a) a typological stream of Hebrew Bible readings for ordinary time and (b) the option of replacing the reading from Acts

in Easter with a reading from the Hebrew Bible. When the RCL was authorized for use by the General Synod of 1998, the Synod specifically rejected the typological stream and mandated the use of the semi-continuous readings. This decision was based upon a commitment to allow the Hebrew narratives to speak for themselves, rather than a salutary prelude to gospel song.

At present, we have a lectionary that combines both approaches, typological during the Incarnation and Resurrection cycles of the liturgical year, semi-continuous on the Sundays between these cycles. This compromise allows us to hold up the central themes of the Christian faith without sacrificing the integrity of the Hebrew Bible.

**2) The lectionary readings are not the only way that the Scriptures are proclaimed and the people of God formed for mission.**

Although it is tempting to assume that the only exposure to the Holy Scriptures occurs through the medium of the lectionary, this assumption is invalid. In a 1992 essay in *Studia Liturgica* Paul

Bradshaw points to four uses of the Scriptures in the liturgy: didactic, anamnestic, parenetic, dox-

ological.

In addition to the readings appointed by the lectionary, the Scriptures are found in our hymns and canticles, our prayers and responses, our exhortations and homilies. While one might hope that Anglicans were more conscious of the sea of Scripture in which they swim when they worship, we cannot deny that Scriptural texts have found their way into the hearts and minds of worshippers. One need only begin, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .” or “Glory to God whose power . . .” in a group of Anglicans to realize how embedded these texts have become.

**3) Bad lectionary preaching is not necessarily the fault of the lectionary but may be a sign of poor training in biblical interpretation and preaching.**

Poor workmanship is not usually the fault of the tool but of the one who uses the tool. Rather than condemn the lectionary one might be more earnest in ensuring two things: First, that theological colleges and dioceses would commit themselves to providing basic and continuing education in the art of preaching and biblical interpretation. Second, responsible use of the lectionary requires that the preacher look more than one Sunday ahead and that he or she is aware of whether the lectionary is in a typological or semi-continuous stream. Responsible liturgical leadership understands the dynamics of the lectionary and liturgical year rather than a narrow focus on ‘priest-craft’ and rubrics.

**4) Patience is a virtue.**

I agree with Professor Deller’s last comment. Our present situation is the result of more than 400 years of social, cultural and theological development. The liturgical solutions of the Reformation are not necessarily appropriate for our own context. Perhaps we should put lectionary revision on the back-burner for some time and let the present generation of lectionaries

**Our present situation is the result of more than 400 years of social, cultural and theological development.**

form us for a good while. We might be surprised at how well we turn out.

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**The Revd Dr. Richard Leggett** is Professor of Liturgical Studies at the Vancouver School of Theology.

# Fewer readings presented in diverse ways

## a response from *Debbie Palmer*

In my mind, Dr. Walter Deller does not go far enough, though he begins an important conversation about biblical literacy amongst Anglican Christians based on the practice of using the weekly lectionary for Sunday morning worship. Dr. Deller needs to be commended for raising this issue, which is one of Anglicanism's sacred cows.

In many circles, the merits of the use of the lectionary have been debated for quite some time. It is with episcopal permission that we leave the lectionary in order to do intentional teaching during sermon series. Departure from the lectionary is based on a larger philosophy of ministry. Given the multi-faceted nature of Anglican liturgy and the pastoral needs of those who attend the "holy mysteries," to posit one goal for Sunday morning may seem simplistic. Nevertheless, it leads to clarity of focus. Sunday morning is primarily about inspiration not instruction. This is what informs what happens in liturgy.

Dr. Deller quotes from The Windsor Report: "The reading of Scriptures in public and in private is an essential element in how the Spirit forms Christian individuals and communities to be faithful disciples and to join with God in the unfolding divine intention for creation, redemption and sanctification." If we truly believe this then we need a fundamental worldview change that impacts liturgy and goes much beyond. We need to be crystal clear that the foundational principle for followers of Jesus is to be involved in on-going, life-long learning. What we do with Holy Scripture within the liturgy can model this. A sermon series is not an end in and of itself. Obviously, a certain body of content should be conveyed in a sermon series but the point is to nourish and intrigue so that the listener will want to learn more! Rather, Sunday morning is to glimpse the potential of Holy Scripture to form us and to kindle a curiosity which will lead to commitment to discipleship.

Given that our ministry context is no longer part of a culture that is predomi-

nately Christian, we can not rightly assume any working knowledge of either Our Story or our values. Then what is the purpose of liturgy and what is the purpose of the proclamation of Holy Scripture within it? Do faith-full festivals produce faithful followers? If the thinking is that participation in liturgy is an opportunity for us to grow more fully into the likeness of Christ, can proclamation imprint people with the life and ministry of Jesus to assist with this transformation? Yes, in part.

As Dr. Deller rightly points out, the intended use of the lectionary involves participation in both the daily office as well as the Sunday morning Eucharist. If our worldview shift was to promote this spiritual discipline for all Anglican Christians we would be a biblically literate people. Most of us acknowledge that in the average parish those who attend an annual Lenten study are "the super holy" and are but a small handful of regular worshippers. The radical change needed in our denominational culture is our attitude to adult education. Small group ministry is a fundamental way for faithful followers to deepen their spirituality—but that is the topic of another article!

Dr. Deller also asks if we need three readings for each Sunday. Although chosen for doctrinal connections, he cites the struggle sometimes necessary to make those connections intelligible. He comments on the length of the readings, noting that we may be distracted by the slivers of scripture that are chosen and may miss the point. Part of what Dr. Deller suggests is that three chapters be read each Sunday acknowledging that it will add 15 minutes to the liturgy. The goal would be that Holy Scripture would be respected and enhanced as each passage was placed in its broader context, the emphasis being on the larger themes of our sacred story. This may well be the

solution. It would be a helpful exercise to study the maturational growth of a parish that followed this course.

With the same end in mind, I would offer a different approach. Three readings are simply too much content to absorb in the context of a Sunday morning worship service. The richness of Holy Scripture in its subtlety and life-changing power can be conveyed by using one passage, presented in different ways. Frequently the passage is the Gospel appointed from the lectionary. Repetition and intensity can be fertile ground for the Spirit to work. Perhaps this is an amplification of what we hope to do when we say that this part of the liturgy is The Proclamation of the Word. The scripture can be read. It can be read from two very different versions. It can be danced. It can be dramatized. Multi-media are essential. A video clip from a Hollywood film can be used as a contemporary rendering. The Visual Bible or another similar resource adds impact. Obviously, the music can be based on the

Biblical passage, which the presider can introduce intentionally, thus drawing out the connections. At St. James' we have added a piece to our liturgy which follows the sermon

### **Sunday morning is to glimpse the potential of Holy Scripture to form us and to kindle a curiosity which will lead to commitment to discipleship.**

entitled Music for Reflection. People are invited to pause and be intentional with the Word. Many people, sometimes months later, have commented on how a certain passage has stayed with them and lived with them because of this methodology. (This does add to the length of the service but we simplify The Gathering of the Community so that Eucharistic worship on a Sunday morning tends to take one hour and 15 minutes.) Just as people participate in the drama of the Sacrament through the liturgy, they would also participate in the drama of the Word. Just as we receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist, we can receive the passage by experiencing it.

Word and Sacrament become both experiential and participatory. This narrowing in on a large handful of verses will work only when it is understood as part of the larger whole. That is, Sunday morning is one essential piece and regular

participation in small group ministry is another. Sunday is a gathering place and a beginning place. A week night spent with fellow journeyers is another crucial part of Christian formation. It would mean that clergy spend more time teaching or creating opportunities for learning. That may mean changing the culture of the local parish concerning their expectations of ordained staff.

Then it becomes the task of the preacher to present the larger themes of the writer and writing and hold it in front of the congregation. During Year A, the congregation can be immersed in Matthew. If the preacher is using a sermon series, preaching, liturgy planning and course preparation become the major task for the week. The focus for the preacher changes from attempting to understand the links between passages to imparting

the larger context and the meaning of one passage.

We have held a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. For a time we suspended using any Creed during worship to underscore the need for all of us to have some insight into what we say week after week. Music was used to reinforce the meaning by singing various versions of the Creed. A skilful librarian can offer books to go deeper on a given topic at the back of the church or at coffee hour. A concurrent adult education course can be offered or weekly reflection exercises can be prepared. Dialogue sermons can be particularly helpful. Sunday morning proclamation and preaching is to whet the appetite of the congregation. The culture of the parish needs to shift

from mere passive acceptance of what is preached to a situation where people have no doubt that there is more to learn and a commitment to learning as part of spiritual maturity.

One common concern raised about leaving the lectionary is that the sermon themes will reflect the preacher's six favourite passages. That may highlight one of the real problems which is only masked by the use of a lectionary. How many of the clergy know Holy Scripture in the way in which we should? Another sacred cow? My Old Testament professor told us all to buy a children's bible. We feigned offense. Then I went out and bought one. I have spent more time since seminary learning about Our Story than any other aspect of my formation

Multi-media are essential  
Scripture can be read... danced... dramatized.

**Just as we receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist, we can receive the passage by experiencing it.**

since seminary. Not only do I believe that the quality of my preaching is enhanced but my own spirituality is also fed. We need to model what we seek to teach.

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**Debbie Palmer** is Incumbent of the Parish of St. James, Humber Bay in the Diocese of Toronto.



## Response to the responders by Walter Deller

It's been nearly a year since I wrote my article, and after reading the responses as they have arrived, I've gone back to reread the original. In it, I offered several grounds for critique:

1. I laid out a description of what I understand from the historic *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)* lectionary patterns to be a normative Anglican pattern of scripture reading, and its broad hermeneutic implications, and questioned whether the *RCL* adequately achieves that norm in the present context in which many Anglicans worship and hear scripture once a week on Sunday.

2. I argued from an analysis of the use of scripture in the *RCL* that it is an irresponsible presentation of the Bible precisely because it omits so much of the scriptures, and in particular questioned why not even the totality of all four gospels are

read over the course of 150 Sundays in the three-year cycle.

3. Thirdly, I argued that the way in which the scriptures are used in a fragmentary and dissociative manner throughout the lectionary contributes to incoherence in understanding and proclamation in the context of contemporary worship, and I proposed some options which would result in considerably more of the scriptures

being read in a potentially more coherent fashion.

4. Finally, I returned to the issues of enabling faith in our post-modern context, and raised a series of questions about what our ecclesial and hermeneutic task might be in this context and whether or not the *RCL* can support us adequately at all in this task.

I don't think I would withdraw any of these arguments based on the responses, and the growing attack by fundamentalists in the Communion on the Anglican way of reading scripture doesn't make the questions less urgent.

Richard Leggett and Kevin Flynn offer from the perspective of liturgical scholars a short summary of the history and premises of the development and shaping of the *RCL*.

To know how we got to where we are is always useful, but I don't think that to keep calling the readings of Ordinary time 'semi-continuous' is a very honest description of the way we find Genesis, Exodus, Samuel or Kings being presented in most years. Richard indicates that he thinks statistical analysis of the proportions of scripture used in the lections is "too blunt an instrument" because it "does not take into consideration issues of genre, relevance and integrity of scriptural pericopes." Does Richard really think that between 30 and 40 percent of each of

the gospels is not relevant to our understanding of God's will for us in Christ? Or that 21% of Genesis (a book which is for the most part a reasonably coherent sequence of narratives) excerpted in fragments from some 20 of its 50 chapters reflects accurately what Genesis is from the perspectives of genre, relevance and integrity of scriptural pericopes? Richard is correct in noting that I did not include an extensive analysis of the use of the psalms because of their 'recovery' in the Eucharistic worship of the Church. The *RCL* uses parts or all of 102 of 150 psalms over a three-year cycle. The 1962 *BCP* Eucharistic lectionary uses part or all of 98 of 150 psalms in a single year.

Both John Hill and Kevin Flynn draw attention to the centrality of the Paschal Mystery as the focus of the *RCL*. Isn't that a bit like saying shelter is the purpose of having a house? I would still want to insist that meditation on and grappling with the entirety of the scriptures is essential to the Church community's fullest understanding of the living out of the Paschal Mystery in the here and now. One could argue cogently that it is precisely the

lectionaries in their historic form that have given Christianity its present sick and warped biblical hermeneutic, and

contributed to the doctrinal shallowness that has resulted in the egregious viciousness of the fundamentalist hermeneutics now being forced upon our Communion. One window into a dark room is not much different from a mirror. To take only one example: Even now the *RCL* almost always presents Jews as evil, failed people before God, replaced by Christianity. Just listen carefully to how prophetic passages and OT narratives are chosen and framed – even to the fragments that are chosen. This is not simply the fault of typology. Typology can also help us see ourselves as repeating and succeeding or failing to be faithful in the same ways.

In some ways Debbie Palmer most clearly grasps the central issues I am pressing about the present context of Christian formation and the way the readings form us. In other ways we are likely the farthest apart in our solutions. If I have understood the implications of her response (and I love the participatory and creative quality she suggests for the liturgical 'presentation' of the gospel), Debbie suggests reducing the readings to one passage only. I don't share the concern she identifies in her final paragraph, except in a much larger form. Were we to follow such a one-reading pattern, would we not attenuate even more our apprehension of the whole journey of faith of God's people throughout the ages, and become locked on the gospels and perhaps one or two choice epistles?

Can it all be blamed on bad preachers? Richard Leggett suggests that "[p]oor workmanship is not usually the fault of the tool but of the one who uses the tool." His metaphor implies that the workman has actually been given the right tool for the task. I'm actually quite surprised as I travel around and hear different preachers how desperately and faithfully they struggle to make something of the confusing little they are given.

A couple of responses to specific comments of John Hill's: First, I would agree with the question he poses at the end of his second paragraph: "What form of Christian community could free us from the sterile aspiration of sustaining a non-existent Christendom, and root us in the biblical Christ?" It's precisely for this reason that I make my "naïve proposal" (John's phrase) that we might read vastly more scripture from both testaments in our Eucharistic assemblies. I can't think of anything more calculated to make us question the illusions of Christendom than a solid hearing of the narrative of Genesis through Kings. And I don't see how reading all four of the gospels in their entirety at least once over a three-year period might not help to root us in the biblical Christ. I'd rather have Canadian Anglicans hearing about the Jesus Christ about whom Matthew, Mark, Luke

and John tell us, than the caricature being foisted upon us by some of the Primates of the Anglican World. Nor do I think it is naïve to imagine we might read more scripture in our assemblies – many other world faiths read large portions of their

canonical texts aloud, and the best evidence I've seen suggests that the early Christians rooted themselves in Christ by gathering and reading

the Old Testament and psalms until they swam in them, and by telling and collecting as much of the story of Jesus as they could.

Finally, John, to John's Gospel: The gospel of John is in the canon and Walter Deller will never be, so it doesn't really matter whether I'm biased or not, and the gospel certainly doesn't need to be defended. My statement that John's Gospel is incomprehensible is first a literary and auditory judgment. I'm not the first person in history to find John convoluted, and his use of language complex and unusual. But I'm also arguing that we should read all of John, not just 69 percent of it, and on reconsideration, I'd like to take my proposition one step further and suggest that in the Mark and John year we could read John fully through twice, and confine ourselves to a single reading of Mark (perhaps with a few chapters doubled up).

**I can't think of anything more calculated to make us question the illusions of Christendom than a solid hearing of the narrative of Genesis through Kings.**

**...the growing attack by fundamentalists in the Communion on the Anglican way of reading scripture doesn't make the questions less urgent.**

## Book Reviews

By John Hodgins

### The Spirit of the Liturgy

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger  
(Ignatius Press. San Francisco, 2000)

Any new occupant of the Chair of St. Peter evokes an analysis of his previously published works. In the case of Benedict XVI, a vast array of publications present themselves dating from his time as a leading theological advisor at Vatican II.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's recent work on the liturgy bears close examination especially by those who might be inclined to see the new pope as defined solely by his recent role as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. His years as a professor of theology at several universities as well as his pastoral experience as a bishop and involvement in ecumenical dialogues with Lutherans and Orthodox provide his perspective in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* which may both surprise some and give clues as to the direction of Benedict XVI's new pontificate.

The book deals with Christian Liturgy under such headings as "Time and Space in the Liturgy," a reflection on the timeless act within time. The author reflects that

The foundation of the liturgy, its source and support, is the historical Pasch of Jesus—his Cross and Resurrection. The once-for-all event has become the ever-abiding form of the liturgy. In the first stage the eternal is embodied in what is once-for-all. The second stage is the entry of the eternal into our present moment in the liturgical action. And the third stage is the desire of the eternal to take hold of the worshipper's life and ultimately of all historical reality (p. 60).

The influence of Guardini's *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, which was published after World War I and is widely credited with inaugurating the Liturgical Movement in



**The redefinition of liturgical norms underway for the Latin Rite of the Roman Communion is seen by the author as a corrective to some of the extreme interpretations of Vatican II.**

Germany, is acknowledged at the outset of the present work. Joseph Ratzinger offers his book as a turn-of-the-millennium update for a general readership, an introduction to the subject of liturgy in the post-Vatican II era.

In the section entitled “The Body and the Liturgy,” a Christian anthropology is developed in which the author holds that contemporary attempts to put worship on a purely ‘spiritual’ plane are inappropriate in Christian worship because it is contrary to human nature. Worship, he contends, affects the whole person. That is, for example, why “bending the knee before the presence of the living God is something we cannot abandon” (p. 191).

An analysis of such matters as the Jewish roots of liturgy, architectural trends, the place of iconography and the eastward position in the liturgy is offered in relation to the need to recover transcendence in worship:

... the architectural canon for the liturgy of the Word and sacrament is not a rigid one, though with every new development and reordering the question has to be posed: What is in harmony with the essence of the liturgy, and what detracts from it? In the very form of its places of divine worship ... Christianity, speaking and thinking in a Semitic way, has laid down principles by which this question can be answered ... one thing has remained clear for the whole of Christendom: praying toward the east is a tradition that goes back to the beginning. Moreover, it is a fundamental expression of the Christian synthesis of cosmos and history, of being rooted in the once-for-all events of salvation history while going out to meet the Lord who is to come again (pp. 74 – 75).

The redefinition of liturgical norms underway for the Latin Rite of the Roman Communion is seen by the author as a corrective to some of the extreme interpretations of Vatican II. These updated norms will, no doubt, have a profound effect upon other Western liturgical churches. The emerging consensus will necessarily be influenced by the continuing dialogue between Rome, the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and Churches of the East which hold a particular place in the heart and mind of Benedict XVI.

An examination of the various rites of the Church, including reference to the Maronite, Chaldean or Assyrian, includes a positive reflection upon the liturgical placement of the exchange of the Peace before the Presentation of the Gifts, something which Anglicans and Lutherans will appreciate (p. 170).

Those expecting a narrow theological view from the author may also be surprised to note that Ratzinger quotes positively the theology of the French priest-scientist Teilhard de Chardin:

Teilhard de Chardin depicted the cosmos as a process of ascent, a series of unions. From very simple beginnings the path leads to ever greater and more complex unities, in which multiplicity is not abolished but merged into a growing synthesis, leading to the ‘Noosphere,’ in which spirit and its understanding embrace the whole and are blended into a kind of living organism (pp. 28 – 29).

Such references give an indication of the liturgical philosophy of the new pope as well as his respect for the diversity of rites which give expression to the cultural variations in the Christian world. This respect for other Christian traditions

speaks to potential openings for a deeper ecumenism and hope for closer relations between churches and ecclesial communities born out of a re-examination of common roots and the shape of the liturgy.

## **The Rise of Benedict XVI**

*John L. Allen Jr.* (Doubleday, N.Y., 2005)



**N**oted as a “progressive,” American Catholic John Allen’s earlier biography of Cardinal Ratzinger was pointedly critical of some of the positions taken by the then Prefect

of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

As a Vatican insider and weekly Internet commentator (The Word From Rome) Allen is very closely associated with the inner workings of the Holy See. In this latest work, he seeks to look at the influences which led to the election of Benedict XVI and the directions in which he may lead the Church.

Of particular interest to Anglicans, Lutherans and others in the West is Benedict’s close study of and the degree of sympathy for the works of Luther and the Lutheran Tradition. In contrast to John Paul II, Allen notes that Benedict is clearly a Western European and, in addition, one of the sharpest theological minds in Europe, something which is acknowledged by his opponents and supporters alike.

Much has been made of Joseph Ratzinger’s close association with the late pope and their common understandings about Liberation Theology, women’s

ordination, contraception and abortion. Certainly Allen affirms that there is unlikely to be change in these areas. However, the author highlights some areas of potential surprise:

Pope Benedict XVI is perhaps the most accomplished intellectual to be elected pope since Leo XIII in 1878 .... Enthusiasts expect the same sort of intellectual flourish under Pope Benedict XVI, a man of potentially even greater learning and refinement (p. 32 ).

In terms of ecumenism, the new pope may make greater progress than his predecessor did with the Orthodox, in light of his close association with Bartholomew, the Patriarch of Constantinople, as well as with other Orthodox leaders. A trip to Russia may not be that far off, according to Allen, in light of statements Benedict XVI has made regarding the limitation of the Petrine Office:

Ratzinger said that “Rome’s single condition for intercommunion should be to accept the teachings of the first millennium on the primacy of the Pope.” ... This point has long been advanced by the Orthodox themselves as the *sine qua non* of reunion, and is sure to be well received among Eastern theologians and bishops (p. 233).

Allen points out that the new Pope is mindful, as well, of the Reformation heritage:

Benedict will not, however, forget the Churches of the West ... Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 1999 was responsible for rescuing the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, an agreement signed by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation declaring the sixteenth-century dispute over whether salvation came by faith alone, or also through works, largely resolved ... [The document states:] By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works (p. 234).

With regard to Anglicans and others Allen points out:

It’s possible to imagine, for example, Pope Benedict expanding the “Anglican Use” provision for members of the Anglican Communion who wish to join the Roman Catholic Church while preserving their own liturgical and devotional traditions. (In 1980, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger approved a ‘pastoral provision’ for Episcopalian clergy and laity entering the Catholic Church in the United States. He may even entertain the idea of creating special Church structures, such as prelatures or apostolic administrations, for dissident Anglicans or Evangelicals who desire union with Rome but who require special pastoral care.) (p. 236)

On the subject of the reform of the Curia, Allen contends that structural change is distinctly within the range of the new papacy. This is due to the fact that Benedict is not beholden to the Curia but is rather “a man who came into the system as a cardinal, and hence someone who does not have the same careerist debts as prelates who rose up through the Vatican’s standard pathways” (p. 204). This is probably good news for Christians of other traditions who look for more transparency from the Holy See.

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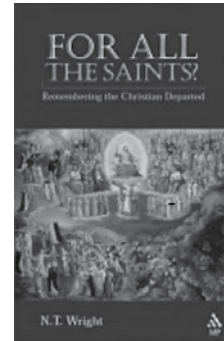
**Fr. John Hodgins**, Pastor of Holy Trinity Church, Chatham, Ontario, is Review Editor for *Liturgy Canada*.

## For All The Saints?: Remembering the Christian Departed

N.T. Wright,

Morehouse Publishing, 2003. 76 pages.

Reviewed by *David Harrison*



“**W**hat I want to know is, where is he now?” It is with that question, asked by a distraught young widow, that Tom Wright (now Bishop of Durham) launches into this tidy essay on life after death, and our liturgical practices surrounding it.

Along the way, Wright’s academic credentials, not to mention his clear-headedness and good wit, show themselves. Drawing on his reading of the New Testament, Wright confidently makes the argument that what many Christians – including Anglicans – seem to believe about life after death, and what our liturgical forms, calendar, and hymnody often reinforce, does not match up to the witness of the New Testament. Wright saves his most forceful argument for debunking the idea of purgatory -- either in its classic form or in its modern, implicit form. By this he means any notion that the Christian believer must undergo after death a period of punishment and cleansing before being able to share in the joys of heaven. Wright shows how the New Testament witness (including Christ’s word to the thief on the Cross – “today you will be with me in Paradise”) argue for the assertion that the stage, if you will, between this life and the final resurrection is what we call heaven or paradise. Although few Anglicans might formally use the word “purgatory”, Wright argues that we often imply it. “I therefore arrive at this view” he concludes, “that all the Christian departed are in substantially the same state, that of restful happiness. This is not the final destiny for which they are found, namely the bodily resurrection; it is a temporary resting place.”

But Wright’s thesis is no pat Anglican evangelical argument against the Romish

abuses of the Middle Ages. He is equally persuasive and passionate in describing and making the case for prayers for the dead, and for the communion of saints. Nor does Wright take of the cause of universalism, reserving the possibility that some people have walked so far down the road of wickedness that they have ceased to be in God's image ("ex-human" is the phrase he uses), and are therefore beyond redemption. A lacuna of this book – and one which the author readily admits – is that he does not deal in any detail with the question of life after death and the non-believer. (A less serious problem, but one that gets in the way of the text, is Wright's propensity to refer to his own (longer) monographs.)

Having established his biblical and theological framework, Wright turns to an examination of the liturgical consequences. He first tackles the practice of keeping both All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, showing how the implicit message is that there are those saints who have "made it" to heaven, and the rest of the souls who are still "works in progress". All Souls' Day, Wright argues, implies the notion of purgatory and seems to suggest that the commendation into God's care that is part of the funeral liturgy has not worked, and thus needs to be supplemented. In his words: "[T]he commemoration of All Souls, especially the way it is now done, denies to ordinary Christians – and we're all ordinary Christians – the solid, magnificent hope of the gospel: that all baptized believers, all those in Christ in the present, all those indwelt by the Spirit, are already 'saints'. Wright also takes on the practice now entrenched in Common Worship of the "Kingdom Season", being the November Sundays leading up to the Feast of Christ the King. Again drawing on his understanding of the New Testament, Wright is critical of the idea of finishing the ecclesiastical year on this note because it represents a misreading of the New Testament meaning of the kingdom. We pray for the kingdom to come to us on earth; the kingdom is not synonymous with heaven, and therefore the "last thing" of the church's year. Wright goes so far as to suggest that if the lectionary is to carve out a "kingdom season", it would best be situated between our celebrations of Epiphany and Good Friday, for it was

the kingdom that Jesus inaugurated in his public ministry. Wright also makes the argument that Ascension Day is the rightful celebration of Christ's kingship, that season of Advent is rightly the time when our focus turns to the coming of Christ's kingdom in its fullest, and that anticipating it by celebrating Christ the King (or the Reign of Christ, as Canadian Anglicans call it) does not make much sense.

Bishop Wright covers a great deal of ground in this short monograph, and covers it well. His essay may help many of us clarify and re-calibrate our own liturgical practices and preaching. Moreover, his style is accessible and engaging, and might well form a productive parish study and be a worthwhile addition to parish libraries.

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**The Reverend David Harrison** is Incumbent of St. Thomas' Anglican Church in Brooklin, Ontario, and Chair of *Liturgy Canada*.

**... many Christians – including Anglicans – seem to believe about life after death, and what our liturgical forms, calendar, and hymnody often reinforce, does not match up to the witness of the New Testament.**

**In paying tribute to the great accomplishments of Raymond Brown, Prendergast maintains that Brown was one who knew well that "we can never underestimate the important relation that exists between liturgy and the interpretation of the Bible."**

## Books briefly noted

### Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown

John R. Donahue, *Editor*  
(Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2005)

**B**eginning with a keynote address by Terrence Prendergast, S.J., Archbishop of Halifax, this recent offering in honour of the late Fr. Raymond Brown, S.S. offers an overview of the impact of biblical studies in the world since the turn of the last century.

In paying tribute to the great accomplishments of Raymond Brown, Prendergast maintains that Brown was one who knew well that "we can never underestimate the important relation that exists between liturgy and the interpretation of the Bible." Prendergast outlines the movement of renewal from the acceptance of the principles of biblical criticism to the development of biblical studies at all levels of the Church and acknowledges the role of scholars who led this development. In particular, he notes that Fr. Brown's work went well beyond academia and, thus, has helped "countless tens of thousands of people throughout the world."

U.S. Protestant scholars join with Jewish and Catholic voices in paying tribute to Brown with papers ranging from "John's Interaction with First-Century Judaism" (Rabbi Burton L. Visotsky, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York and Professor Adele Reinhartz, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario) to "Future Directions of Johannine Studies" (D. Moody Smith, The Divinity School of Duke University). In the course of ten papers presented by some 17 North American scholars we see illustrated not only the distance travelled with regard to our understanding of the Johannine corpus but the contribution of one of its greatest interpreters. Brown's skilfulness as a teacher is legendary not only in Baltimore and New York but through the worldwide community of Church scholars and laity.

Again, in the words of Archbishop Prendergast: "Above and beyond all of those remarkable qualities, Raymond Brown was a man of faith and an eminent

scholar who helped shape many people's understanding of the person of Jesus Christ."

### The Nuptial Mystery

*Angelo Cardinal Schola*  
translated by Michelle K. Borrás  
(Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005)

**T**he latest offering in the Eerdmans Ressourcement series introduces to an English-speaking audience the incisive and encyclopaedic mind of Angelo Schola, the recently appointed Patriarch of Venice.

Addressing the perennial question: What is love? Schola offers a deep analysis of the male-female relationship and how it illustrates the heart of what it means for humanity to bear the image of God.

An emerging leader in Catholic and ecumenical thought, the author explores the nuptial mystery as he elucidates the development of Christian thinking from Augustine and the Patristic period through Aquinas to Maritain, von Balthasar, de Lubac, Ricoeur and, most recently, Alisdair MacIntyre (an Anglican).

Post-modernists may be surprised to discover in the author a man who is both conversant with modern thought and a person of faith. He offers a theological perspective in light of the thought and views of such influential secular minds as Hegel, Freud and Heidegger. For example, in treating the topic 'Affection,' Schola compares two influential thinkers of very different eras and worldviews, Freud and Aquinas:

In the panorama of contemporary culture, we find the most adequate response to our question in the work of Sigmund Freud. This is not the place to discuss the merits or otherwise of such a predominant school of thought. Rather, we will consider a central the-

sis of Freud's thought . . . The reader may be surprised by our decision to discuss the theme of affection by referring to the *Summa Theologiae* of Saint Thomas Aquinas (p. 60).

In treating dualism, spiritualism and androgynism, the author does not shy away from speaking to the many influences of modern culture which affect both Christian and secular views of marriage and the nuptial mystery. He concludes with a liturgical synthesis and a meditation:

...the sacramental reality of marriage and the family is presented as the anthropological concentration of the eucharistic-ecclesial event. In it, in fact, the sacramental dynamic truly liberates . . .

*John Hodgins*

## Readers respond

*Liturgy Canada* certainly betrays its urban roots in the latest issue. The question of multiple services is, quite simply, a non-starter in huge areas of Canada. Multi-point parishes are the rule in many areas of the West. The question in most these rural areas is not how many services to have in one building, but how often the priest can be there for the one service they do have.

### **The Very Rev. Robin Walker**

St. Matthew's Cathedral, Brandon MB

I have come to expect clear, incisive analysis from my friend Paul Bosch. So I was both disappointed and a little surprised when his article "One flock, one Shepherd" (*Liturgy Canada* X, 4 [Easter 2005], page 1) did not clarify any of the issues for me. Each of his four arguments makes a good point. But several important items are omitted.

His liturgical argument is valid: multiple services encourage the perception that people are consumers of a religious product. But, as Bosch himself observes, this is "a misperception at least as old as the Middle Ages." It did not arise with the variety of liturgical styles, and it will not be avoided by having only one Sunday service. John Hill's response (same issue, page 2) is much more profound. Until we are willing to openly deal with issues such as the assumptions built into our very architecture, it is extremely difficult to get people to understand the theological point about community. (Bosch himself has eloquently argued this point elsewhere.)

A similar point could be raised about the sociological and theological-ecclesial arguments. Yes, multiple services may promote different sociological groupings which obscure the wonderful fullness and diversity which are one in Christ. But again, this was the prevailing situation long before multiple services became common in many parishes. People have come to regard the different denominations, or even the different parishes of the same denomination within a city, as a smorgasbord of religious choices within Christianity. Certain types of "ecclesial apartheid" are already the norm. A much

broader view is needed.

Indeed, the very repetition of the word "preferences" can be misleading. Some items are indeed a matter of taste and style. But for me, at least one item is much more basic. A key Reformation principle was that the liturgy be in the language of the people. Thus, in my judgement, a parish which offers a service in the language of the 16th Century as the only option on a Sunday has abandoned this vital principle. Conversely, the critique which the Prayer Book Society has raised about the Book of Alternative Services is not merely about taste. In the opinion of many, decisions which guided the BAS were theologically wrong.

As a result, it is almost impossible to discuss how a single service would be shaped without becoming trapped in a win/lose argument. And questions of taste and preference become ciphers for other, more profound disagreements.

The real question, I suppose, is whether we have already become so segregated that we cannot in truth be one flock. I hope that the answer is "no, we can still live together and respect one another." I have no desire to see the liturgical "traditionalists" pushed out of the Anglican, Lutheran, or any other communion. But I don't think we can discuss the question of multiple services intelligently until we acknowledge that the question is both broader and deeper than it appears to be.

### **Paul Sadtke**

Paul, a Lutheran pastor, is Joint Co-ordinator of the Henry Budd College for Ministry in The Pas, Manitoba.

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