

The Revised Common Lectionary

an Invitation to Practise the Story of Christ

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE HISTORY OF THE LECTIONARY

- The lectionary and the church year began to develop in the first four centuries of Christianity, mainly around: (1) the decision to hold public worship on Sundays; (2) the centrality of Easter to a Christian sense of time; (3) the need to prepare people for baptism before Easter.
- In the earlier centuries, lists of readings were quite diverse. Regional dioceses had their own lectionaries and rites. After the Roman empire established Christianity as the state religion, lectionaries and rites tended to become more uniform across Europe.
- In the Reformation, Luther kept the existing lectionary and church year, but removed most of the feast days which did not have some kind of warrant in the biblical story of Christ. The Moravians and Anabaptists rejected the notion of a uniform lectionary altogether. Zwingli, Calvin & Knox rejected much of the existing church year but instituted a lectionary that covered much of the bible. The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* retained a lectionary that followed the Roman church year.
- In 1969, following the 2nd Vatican Council, the Roman church published a three-year lectionary which provided for 3 readings plus a responsorial psalm for each Sunday and festival over a three-year period. The readings were ordered by theme, and were directly connected to the sacred calendar. Lectionaries based on the Roman lectionary were published in new Protestant worship books during the 1970s and early 80s.
- By the mid-to-late eighties, most mainstream Protestant denominations in the world had adopted a 'Common Lectionary' that was published in 1983 by the international Consultation on Common Texts. It is the lectionary used by the first edition of *Uniting in Worship*, which was published in 1989. A *Revised Common Lectionary* (RCL) was published in 1992, and this has been adopted by practically every Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist & Reformed church in the English-speaking world. It is the lectionary we have been using in the Uniting Church since 1993.

HOW THE LECTIONARY WORKS ON ANY GIVEN SUNDAY OR FEAST DAY

- The lectionary follows a three year cycle of Bible readings for Sundays and major feast days. Each year focuses on one of the Synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke. Readings from John are scattered throughout each year, especially during Lent and Easter. Year B has more readings from John because Mark is the shortest gospel.
- Along with the gospel reading, the lectionary provides for two other readings plus a responsive Psalm or Canticle. In the Roman lectionary, all these readings were linked, thematically, to the gospel reading for the day. That is still usually the case in the first half of the liturgical year (Advent to Pentecost). But the

Sundays known as 'ordinary Sundays', which make up roughly half the year, work differently. In this period the lectionary provides, along with an Epistle and gospel reading, two options for an Old Testament reading, and two companion Psalms. The first option continues to link the themes with the gospel. The second follows several Old Testament books from beginning to end, so that congregations may appreciate the unfolding of a narrative. Here, the lectionary does not attempt to gather the readings together under one obvious theme. The preacher is encouraged, instead, to choose one stream and preach through an entire book. (Unfortunately the UCA has decided not to publish the readings for the first option).

- The first reading for the day is usually from the Old Testament. The exception is the season of Easter, when a reading from the book of Acts will usually replace the Old Testament.
- The Psalm is always to be understood as a congregational response to the first reading. The new *Together in Song* book includes a setting of almost every Psalm in the RCL.
- The RCL is linked, especially in the first half of the year, to the unfolding of the liturgical seasons. Two great cycles form the centrepiece—Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter. In these two cycles of readings, the emphasis is very much on the story of Jesus, and the call for each Christian who hears the story to conform themselves to Christ in his life, death, and resurrection. It is to the spirituality of those seasons and cycles that I should now like to turn.

IMITATING CHRIST THROUGH THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE LITURGICAL YEAR

- Please work your way through the on-line slideshow found at <http://deverell.unitingchurch.org.au/thesacredyear.mht>
- The Sunday lectionary is designed for communal, ritual worship and learning, not primarily for private individual observance. This reflects an understanding in which it is only together, as a community, that we may become Christ's body in whom the Spirit is active to transform the world.

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