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# Towards a Better Lectionary :

The effective liturgical use of the Gospels

JOHN TILLER

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THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND has always reckoned that it gives as great a place to the reading of Scripture in its services as any church in Christendom. Now a new level has been reached in the number of alternative lectionary schemes available. This is reflected in the amount of material presented in the 1973 edition of the SPCK—Mowbrays Lectionary, which gives the 1961 Table of Lessons (Year 1) for Morning and Evening Prayer on Sundays and Holy Days; the 1971 Alternative Lectionary for Weekdays (Year 1); and the Series 3 Eucharistic Lectionary (Year 1). In printing this information, however, this useful publication has of course only given a selection of what may be used. No doubt the selection will in fact have the effect of keeping many congregations together in their Bible reading, but the use of two separate eucharistic lectionaries is bound to be widespread for some time to come. Much of the most recent work, including the Series 3 Eucharistic Lectionary, is based on the scheme of the Joint Liturgical Group, an ecumenical working party whose proposals entitled *The Calendar and Lectionary: A Reconsideration* were edited by Canon R. C. D. Jasper and published by the Oxford University Press in 1967.<sup>1</sup>

The present article does not attempt a full critique of current lectionary provision. Rather, it seeks to question some of the principles on which the influential work of the Joint Liturgical Group has been based, and to offer some alternative suggestions specifically concerning the liturgical use of the Gospels. These suggestions do of course have implications which would affect the entire lectionary and which would require further consideration.

## *The merits and demerits of the Series 3 Lectionary*

ONE of the really harmful consequences in recent years of the disappearance of Morning Prayer in many churches in favour of Holy

Communion or a Family Service has been the loss of a reasonably comprehensive scheme of Bible reading in return for the disjointed series of snippets to be found in the Prayer Book Epistles and Gospels (which were never intended to be sufficient on their own); or worse still, in the case of the Family Service, perhaps a selection of favourite readings chosen by the minister from week to week without any overall plan. Now, in the case of Holy Communion at least, the situation has been greatly improved where the Series 3 Order is in use by the provision of a set of three readings for each Sunday and Holy Day. These allow the Old Testament to be read in the service; give greater coverage of the New Testament by working to a two-year cycle; and in any given service attempt to speak to a common theme. These advantages should be weighed by those parishes which are at present using Series 2 and wondering whether to make the effort to change to Series 3. Nevertheless, in certain fundamental respects, these readings represent no real advance on the traditional haphazard collection of Epistles and Gospels, and even introduce certain principles into the lectionary which are detrimental to its proper use in worship. This is, in truth, an unsatisfactory state of affairs for a Church which believes that its forms of worship are so constructed that the devotions of its members are prompted and controlled by the Word of God.

Some of the innovations of the Series 3 Lectionary would probably have been made without the encouragement of the Joint Liturgical Group. Both the Series 1 and Series 2 Orders for Holy Communion make provision in the rubrics for an Old Testament lesson, and *Alternative Services: First Series* actually supplied a set.<sup>8</sup> It is likely also that the Liturgical Commission would have opted for a two-year cycle of readings. But the lead given by the Joint Liturgical Group has been followed in the choice of most of the readings, and this has inevitably involved acceptance of the principle of a controlling lection with specific theme for each week, and, of course, the general *length* of each reading. The significance of this last point for the case presented in this article will appear later. There has been much greater reluctance to follow the amendments of J.L.G. to the Calendar. The cardinal point of extending the Advent season to give a more satisfactory period for the OT controlling lections has been in essence accepted by adopting a series of five Sundays *before Advent*, which, with the four in Advent comes to the same thing as J.L.G.'s nine before Christmas. Similar quibbling over words is to be found in the retention of a season after Trinity rather than J.L.G.'s adoption of the Roman season after Pentecost. Traditional names are also kept for the Sundays between the Epiphany and Easter. It has naturally been essential in Series 3 to provide for a movable Easter, with its present variation of up to five Sundays after the Epiphany and after Trinity. In two ways the Liturgical Commission has made the scheme more suitable for Anglican use. Provision has been made for various extra Holy Days, and this

has also necessitated the rearrangement of some of the Sunday lessons. Secondly, the Gospel is expected to be used throughout the year in accordance with Anglican practice, and the system of controlling lections, while still of course supplying the theme each week, becomes in practice a matter of knowing which to choose between the OT reading and the Epistle.<sup>3</sup>

Probably the greatest single advantage secured by the adoption of a scheme of Bible reading in public worship is deliverance from the limitations of subjective selection. Obviously some degree of choice must be present: what to leave out; and where to begin and end each week. Even if it were considered desirable to use every part of Scripture for public reading, there are severe practical difficulties in the way of doing this on a Sundays only basis. But the crucial test of any lectionary is the amount of limitation imposed on Scripture by the choice of what to omit and where to divide. If this choice is badly made, then the chief objective of the lectionary is not achieved.

It is on this basis that criticism must be made of the J.L.G. and Series 3 scheme. Attention may be concentrated on three particular ways in which severe limitations are imposed.

1. The chosen readings are all cut to the right size and shape in the interests of maintaining a 'proper balance of the various parts of the Liturgy'; and so that the 'demands upon the congregation' may not be excessive.<sup>4</sup> As a result the three readings each week are permitted to amount to a total varying between 17 and 41 verses and averaging 30 verses overall. This is to make a Procrustean bed of the liturgy into which Scripture must be fitted, so reversing the role of worship as a total response to the Word of God. That response must be demanding upon the congregation if it is to deserve the name of true worship. The demands made by the lessons, however, are not passivity and boredom. Ways are suggested below of seeing the reading of Scripture as the most compelling part of the service.

2. Even a two-year cycle of readings permits only a tiny fraction of Scripture to be read on Sundays at the eucharistic assembly. This problem is made even worse by the restriction to tailored snippets just noticed. Coverage is of course much greater in the Gospels than anywhere else, yet more than two thirds of the material is omitted, including, for example, the major part of the Sermon on the Mount. Granted that something must be left out, it remains clearly true that the dangers of subjective selection will be much greater where the proportion of Scripture omitted is a large part of the whole.

3. The idea of controlling lections giving themes for each Sunday is proposed in such a way as to increase the limitations of the lectionary. To be fair to the Joint Liturgical Group, this danger is one they have considered: 'It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the thematic titles provided are no more than *indications* of emphasis. They must not be allowed to give false rigidity to the hearing of Scriptures or the

preaching of the Word of God.'<sup>6</sup> Awareness of the danger led the Liturgical Commission ultimately to drop the titles for each Sunday from the Series 3 Lectionary. It would clearly be a mistake to limit the message of the Word to just one theme in each group of three passages read for each Sunday. But the problem is even larger than this and is inherent in the whole lectionary scheme. It stems from the fact that no attempt is made to read books of the Bible systematically. Instead a general framework has been drawn up, dividing the Christian Year into three. In the first period the emphasis is on the Old Testament, God the Father, and the work of Creation; in the second, it is on the Gospels, God the Son, and the work of Redemption; in the third, the Acts and the Epistles, God the Holy Spirit, and the work of the Church. Themes are allotted to each Sunday within this framework. Despite the claim that passages of Scripture were selected before the themes, the result of such a plan must inevitably be that on any given Sunday the message of the readings is governed by the theme rather than by what the biblical writers are trying to say. This is not to deny the value of having lessons in the same service which are related to each other. But this should be done by working through a particular book, and adding relevant passages from other parts of the Bible where appropriate. It was probably in this way that a second reading from the Prophets came to be added to the reading of the Law in the Jewish synagogue.

### *Worship governed by the Word*

FROM the criticisms already made of the Series 3 Eucharistic Lectionary, some idea may be gained of what the present writer would argue should take its place. The proposal may now be summarised, before its application to the reading of the Gospels in particular is worked out in detail. The Gospels have always had a specially significant place in eucharistic worship; and they are moreover, virtually in their entirety, splendid material for public reading. The plan, then, is for the complete reading of the Gospels at the weekly eucharist. Granted that the J.L.G. are right in saying that this cannot be done in one year, despite the advantages this would have in terms of the Calendar, investigation will show that it can reasonably be done in four. Arguments that a four-year cycle is intrinsically worse than a two-year one are not convincing. In the case of the Gospels there is the obvious attraction that in a four-year cycle one year may be given primarily to each Gospel, and the lectionary year even named after the Evangelist being heard. The Gospel reading would normally be the *first* reading at the eucharist, and on many Sundays a second lesson would be provided from the Old Testament or the Epistles. Similar primary treatment might be given to other books of the Bible at the

second Sunday service. The keynote, however, would be flexibility in the service to permit a proper recognition of the Word. So it might be right at times to reverse the order of the lessons.

Of much greater importance than the order of the lessons is their division into natural lengths. There is an immense difference here between, for example, the Second and the Fourth Gospels. Whereas St. Mark proceeds in units of convenient size for the requirements of the J.L.G. scheme on the whole, it is quite disastrous to interrupt the narratives of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4: 1-42), the man born blind (John 9: 1-41), or the raising of Lazarus (John 11: 1-54).<sup>6</sup> Such readings may appear to be impossibly long and to make unrealistic 'demands upon the congregation'. Three points, however, should be borne in mind. The first is that unusually long readings might be compensated for by having no second lesson. Secondly, as an alternative, some other part of the liturgy might be abbreviated on such occasions. Thirdly, there is no need for the congregation to listen to one voice reading at length. The lengthy passages listed above are precisely those which are suited to dramatic reading with several members of the congregation taking part. Furthermore, if the passage really does focus the direction of the worship in the service as a whole, then there is no need for the whole passage to be read at one place in the service. These narratives might be read scene by scene through the service. This is not difficult in the eucharist, as many of the passages have the same general structure of sense of need—manifestation of God's grace and salvation—response of faith and praise which is present in the eucharistic liturgy. The Johannine passages in particular are well known for their use of symbols which are close to those of the sacraments themselves.

### *A Scheme of Gospel Readings*

THE Table of readings given in the Appendix shows how this scheme might be worked out for the Gospels over a four-year cycle. The days provided for are the 57 Sundays of the Series 3 Table (to allow for the variation of Easter) and in addition Christmas Day, Good Friday and Ascension Day. These are the days when the majority of regular Anglican worshippers may be expected to take part in the liturgy. Separate provision may be made for other Holy Days. The whole of the four Gospels are used with the exception of the genealogical lists of Matthew 1: 1-17 and Luke 3: 23-38. Repetition has been necessary where certain seasonal themes were not available in all four Gospels: 1: 2, 1: 28, 1: 29, 2: 1, 2: 2, 2: 28, 2: 29, 3: 28, 3: 29, 4: 1.

For convenience the Table is printed to begin the Sunday before Christmas. The Christian Year is a cycle, and therefore has no clear start and finish. The 'join' is made in Advent, which both prepares for

Christmas and the coming of Christ in humility to the stable, and also speaks of the second coming of Christ in glory to judge both the quick and the dead. The length of the Advent season has varied in Christian history and J.L.G. have suggested extending it. The appearance of the second coming theme varies each year in the present scheme according to its place in the different Gospels: 1: 59, 2: 56, 3: 55, 4: 55. In the Sunday before Christmas, however, the theme is always the coming to the stable, and therefore the Table begins at this point.

The arrangement of the Christian Year of course renders it out of the question simply to read straight through each Gospel in turn. Nevertheless some kind of progressive treatment of the Gospel narratives is of the essence of the scheme. It has been possible to make a simple compromise between the demands of the Calendar and the ideal of systematic reading. Following the Christmas readings there is time to cover the childhood, baptism, temptation and early ministry of Jesus before changing at reading no. 11 (no. 9 in year 4) to concentration on the journey to Jerusalem, the opposition of the Pharisees, and the events leading up to the Cross. These passages tie together quite easily. An examination will show that the note of opposition from the religious leaders appears in the earlier readings just before the jump is made. The Series 3 Calendar (despite the titles) of nine Sundays before Easter is thus preserved. When the set of Resurrection—Ascension—Pentecost readings is finished the remaining central section of each Gospel is covered, leaving the Advent themes to introduce the new Gospel book for the coming year.

When the task of allocating the readings over four years had been completed on this basis, five Sundays remained vacant: 2: 22, 2: 23, 2: 51, 2: 52, and 4: 50. For these spaces any readings might be selected which had been missed owing to the fluctuation of Easter. In the Table five of the more important ones which might be so affected have been inserted. The majority of readings, if slightly longer than those of J.L.G., are of similar length to those with which congregations at Morning and Evening Prayer are already familiar. But because of the principle of going for the next natural unit to follow the previous reading there is great variation in length. Some are very short: eight or nine are lengthy enough to require special arrangements in the order of service to make allowances. These include the four Good Friday readings which ought to have special liturgical provision in any case.

At the present time the Bible readings are all too often merely a pause in the ongoing progress of the service. By systematically listening to each Evangelist in turn in the way suggested, it should be possible in each local congregation to build up a sense of anticipation for the reading from week to week, and a greater consciousness that it is these mighty acts of the Lord which we are proclaiming and celebrating in the liturgy. Each service ought to be distinctive because of

the Word of God for that week, and yet linked to the previous week and the following week, because it is a continuously unfolding account of the ministry of Jesus. The Gospels were given to the Church, to be amongst other things one of its greatest liturgical treasures. What can be said for the Church's worship if it fails to make full and effective use of this gracious provision of God?

## THE TABLE OF GOSPEL READINGS

No.	Day	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
1	Bef. Christ.	Matt. 1: 18-25	Matt. 1: 18-25	Luke 1: 57-80	Matt. 1: 18-25
2	Christmas	Luke 2: 1-20	John 1: 1-18	2: 1-20	John 1: 1-18
3	Christmas 1	Matt. 2: 1-15	Mark 1: 1-13	2: 21-40	1: 19-34
4	2	2: 16-23	1: 14-28	2: 40-52	1: 35-51
5	3	3: 1-17	1: 29-45	3: 1-22	2: 1-12
6	4	4: 1-11	2: 1-12	4: 1-15	2: 13-25
7	5	4: 12-22	2: 13-22	4: 14-30	3: 1-21
8	6	4: 23-5: 20	2: 23-3: 6	4: 31-44	3: 22-36
9	7	5: 21-48	3: 7-19	5: 1-11	11: 1-54
10	8	6: 1-18	3: 20-35	5: 12-16	11: 55-12: 11
11	9 Easter	21: 23-46	11: 1-11	18: 31-34 and 19: 11-28	12: 12-19
12	8 Easter	22: 1-14	11: 12-26	19: 29-44	12: 20-43
13	7	22: 15-33	11: 27-12: 12	19: 45-20: 8	12: 44-50
14	6	22: 34-46	12: 13-34	20: 9-26	13: 1-20
15	5	23: 1-24: 2	12: 35-44	20: 27-21: 4	13: 21-38
16	4	26: 1-19	14: 1-17	22: 1-13	16: 16-33
17	3	26: 20-35	14: 17-31	22: 14-34	17: 1-26
18	2	26: 36-56	14: 32-52	22: 35-53	18: 1-11
19	1	26: 57-75	14: 53-72	22: 54-62	18: 12-27
20	Good Friday	27: 1-66	15: 1-47	22: 63-23: 56	18: 28-19: 42
21	Easter Day	28: 1-20	16: 1-8	24: 1-12	20: 1-18
22	Easter 1	6: 19-34	John 11: 1-27	24: 13-35	20: 19-31
23	2	7: 1-12	11: 28-54	5: 17-26	21: 1-14
24	3	7: 13-29	Mark 4: 1-20	5: 27-39	21: 15-25
25	4	8: 1-17	4: 21-34	6: 1-11	14: 15-31
26	5	8: 18-34	4: 35-41	6: 12-31	15: 1-17
27	Ascension	28: 16-20	16: 9-20	24: 36-53	14: 1-14
28	Easter 6	John 15: 18-27	John 15: 18-27	John 15: 18-27	15: 18-27
29	Pentecost	16: 1-15	16: 1-15	16: 1-15	16: 1-15
30	Pentecost 1	Matt. 9: 1-13	Mark 5: 1-20	Luke 6: 32-38	4: 1-42
31	2	9: 14-26	5: 21-34	6: 39-49	4: 43-54
32	3	9: 27-38	5: 35-43	7: 1-17	5: 1-18
33	4	10: 1-15	6: 1-13	7: 18-35	5: 19-29
34	5	10: 16-33	6: 13-29	7: 36-50	5: 30-47
35	6	10: 34-42	6: 30-44	8: 1-21	6: 1-21
36	7	11: 1-19	6: 45-56	8: 22-39	6: 22-34
37	8	11: 20-30	7: 1-23	8: 40-56	6: 35-47
38	9	12: 1-21	7: 24-30	9: 1-17	6: 48-71
39	10	12: 22-37	7: 31-37	9: 18-27	7: 1-13
40	11	12: 38-50	8: 1-10	9: 28-36	7: 14-24



41	12	13: 1-23	8: 11-21	9: 37-50	7: 25-36
42	13	13: 24-43	8: 22-26	9: 51-62	7: 37- 8: 1
43	14	13: 44-58	8: 27- 9:1	10: 1-24	8: 2-11
44	15	14: 1-21	9: 2-13	10: 25-37	8: 12-30
45	16	14: 22-36	9: 14-29	10: 38-42	8: 31-47
46	17	15: 1-20	9: 30-50	11: 1-13	8: 48-59
47	18	15: 21-39	10: 1-16	11: 14-32	9: 1-41
48	19	16: 1-12	10: 17-31	11: 33-54	10: 1-21
49	20	16: 13-28	10: 32-45	12: 1-12	10: 22-42
50	21	17: 1-13	10: 46-52	12: 13-31 Luke	5: 1-11
51	22	17: 14-27 Matt.	5: 21-48	12: 32-48	18: 1-14
52	23	18: 1-14	6: 1-18	12: 49-59	18: 15-30
53	9 Christmas	18: 15-35 Luke	16: 19-31	13: 1-9	18: 35-43
54	8	19: 1-15	17: 1-10	13: 10-21	19: 1-10
55	7	19: 16-30	17: 11-19	13: 22-35 Matt.	24: 1-14
56	6	20: 1-16	17: 20-37	14: 1-24	24: 15-28
57	5	20: 17-34	21: 5-38	14: 25-35	24: 29-51
58	4	21: 1-22	1: 1-25	15: 1-10	25: 1-13
59	3	Mark 13: 1-13	1: 26-38	15: 11-32	25: 13-30
60	2	13: 14-37	1: 39-56	16: 1-18	25: 31-46

<sup>1</sup> An adaptation of these proposals for use by the Church of England was contained in a report from the Liturgical Commission entitled *The Calendar and Lessons for the Church's Year*, published by SPCK in 1969.

<sup>2</sup> *Alternative Services: First Series*, SPCK, 1966, pp. 65f. The Table was taken from the CIPBC Prayer Book of 1960.

<sup>3</sup> That is, where only two readings are used. The Liturgical Commission asterisked the controlling lections in *The Calendar and Lessons for the Church's Year*, but they were not distinguished in the Series 3 Report.

<sup>4</sup> *The Calendar and Lectionary*, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *The Calendar and Lectionary*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> It is just possible to break off at John 11: 27, but to read only verses 17-27 as J.L.G. is a poor shift.