

On use of the Lectionary

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Way back when I was 10 (55 years ago), I used to grab dad's lectionary before we went to Evening Prayer on a Sunday so that I could bookmark the readings in my Bible and have them ready to find during the service.



I recall even then that there were many Sundays where the readings used were different from those in the lectionary. “Why don’t they use the set readings dad?” “Because Mr Goodhew (our rector), likes to work through a whole book at a time.”

The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) was developed by the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), an ecumenical consultation of liturgical scholars and denominational representatives from the United States and Canada. The RCL was first published in 1992, with revisions in 1994 and 2002. The RCL primarily focuses on Sunday readings, providing a three-year cycle of scripture readings for each Sunday of the liturgical year. It is important to note that in the Anglican Church of Australia, the use of lectionary readings, although common, is not mandated. Each diocese and indeed each parish, has the flexibility to choose whether or not to use the lectionary readings.

There is much that can be helpful about the lectionary readings:

- Four readings in a service mean that reading the Bible aloud has a high priority and is recognised as an important part of what we do when we gather for church.

- Aspects of the church calendar are highlighted at appropriate times in the year.
- Links between the readings are pointed out.
- And as many denominations use the same lectionary, there is a certain unity across the churches.

However, many will have noticed that my weekly video sermons, used in many churches each week and by many individuals, have not generally been from one of the lectionary readings.

While the lectionary has its strengths, I usually determine my own reading and preaching program for the following reasons:

1. The lectionary often moves from one book or passage to another.

In the last few weeks, even though this year is when Mark’s Gospel takes precedence, the Gospel readings have been – Mark 6:1-13; Mark 6:14-29; Mark 6:30-34 and 53-56; then over to John 6:1-21 and John 6:24-35.

To move over to John’s Gospel in the midst of a sequence through Mark, is very challenging. John’s Gospel is entirely different from Mark’s and to help people understand the passages in their

context and ‘re-set’ the stage for John, is not easy.

Even through Lent, designed to prepare us for Easter, the readings did not move sequentially through Mark, recounting the lead up to Easter. The six week’s readings for Lent this year were: Mark 1:9-15; then to Mark 9:2-9; then into John 2:13-22; John 3:14-21; then over to John 12:20-33 and finally back to Mark 14-15 (the passion narrative).

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I would not open a book and read from chapter 1 one week, and chapter 9 the next. Nor would I skip from chapter 3 to chapter 12. We need to understand that the books of the Bible are not simply resources full of disconnected ‘lessons’, but have an internal integrity, intentional structure and purposeful flow of argument. The regular moving from one book to another or from one section of a book to another, does not give a clear understanding of the passages in their context or the books as a whole.

In Advent this year, when we look to the return of Jesus, again the Gospel

readings jump from place to place. Here they are in sequence: Luke 21:25-38, back in Luke to chapter 3:1-6, Luke 3:7-18, then back further to Luke 1:39-45. I would find it difficult to clearly teach the themes of Advent with that sequence.

Of course, where there is only a service once a month or once a fortnight, using the lectionary makes even less sense, as everyone misses out on all the readings in between and there is an even greater jump from one service to the next in terms of the readings used.

2. Many Christians appreciate working through a whole book (or significant portion) at a time.

My own pattern throughout parish ministry, which I have largely followed in my sermons here, is to preach from a Gospel in the first term (tied to Lent and Easter), an Epistle in the second term (this year Galatians), the Old Testament in the third term (this year Joshua) and then in the fourth term, something topical or doctrinal before an Advent series. (This year in term four, I will follow the lectionary Gospel readings as there is a lovely run through a section of Mark – though noting that even then, some passages are skipped.) Working progressively through a book of the Bible, tends to be more helpful for people, giving them a much deeper and richer understanding of each passage in its context. It also equips people to read the Bible for themselves.

3. Though the familiar rhythm of the three-year cycle can bring comfort and consistency, for some, it might feel repetitive over time.

If you've been using the RCL since it was first published in 1992, that means that every three years for 32 years, you've had the same set of readings again and again in church. Some of you will know the sequence very well by now! It also means that a minister, once they have

prepared sermons for a cycle, can simply re-use the sermon from three years ago – which is not good for the preacher or the congregation. (That is not to say that I never re-use sermons – I do. But if this pattern becomes the norm, the preacher is not continually learning by tackling new material.)

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Another related issue is that because there is a lot of material which is common to Matthew, Mark and Luke, then within each year, there are a lot of repeated stories, parables, miracles and teaching which occur regularly in the lectionary Gospel readings.

4. Tackling all four readings in a homily means that no passage is dealt with in depth.

Although I admire the attempt to link the four passages each week (or even perhaps 3 of the 4), the result can be that no passage is treated in depth, as time does not allow the preacher to explain the context or develop all the themes in each passage. And at times, the links between the passages are somewhat tenuous. Consequently the congregation can be left either overwhelmed or confused by the minister's well-meaning attempts.

5. The local shepherd, tasked with feeding their sheep is best placed to determine what their congregation needs.

When I was a parish minister, I never planned a whole year of preaching in advance. I waited to see how the year unfolded, and then determined what the congregation needed: comfort for grief; assurance for salvation; clarity around the gospel; deeper understanding of the

flow of the whole Bible etc. As your minister gets to know their congregation, they are able to assess the current needs and tailor the preaching accordingly.

6. Less is more.

I find it challenging to actively listen to all four lectionary readings, especially when the Old Testament reading comes from a major prophet where the context is not clear. In my parish ministry, I reduced the number of readings to foster deeper engagement. In traditional communion services, I used either an Old Testament reading or an Epistle reading (but not both), followed by the Gospel reading, one of which was the preaching passage. In contemporary services, we had just two readings: an Old Testament passage and a New Testament passage. One was the preaching text, the other a related reading. I believe this approach encouraged more active listening and a greater engagement with and benefit from the reading of God's word.

Please know that if your church currently uses the lectionary readings, there is NO pressure from me to change! You are free to work out what is best for your context. Nevertheless, I hope this brief paper has been helpful in explaining the reasons behind my approach.

May God's word continue to take pre-eminence in our services, whichever way we determine is best – to build up God's people, to lead us all to maturity, to make us wise for salvation and to equip us for every good work – to God's eternal praise.

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