

Choosing the Readings

Christ the King 2016

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Advent is now on the near-horizon, and this Sunday, which focusses the on the theme of Christ as King, brings a fitting and positive climax to the Church's year.

In our Gospel reading from Luke's Gospel (Luke has been the preferred Gospel for Sunday readings for the last 12 months) Jesus is certainly called 'King' but in an ironic way as it was part of the soldiers' mocking words: "If you are the King of the Jews, Save yourself!". The placard above the cross which read 'The King of the Jews' was put there to indicate a charge but – we would say – in a theological sense it indicated a deep truth about Jesus' identity.

The crucifixion scene actually describes the kind of Kingship Jesus exercises: one of servanthood, and one of promise. So the reading challenges ideas about the exercise of temporal, earthly power, and suggests instead that Jesus' Kingship is about new values in a new era.

So the Luke passage is an appropriate starting point for thoughts about *Christ the King*, although it may be surprising to hear about the crucifixion scene at this particular time of the year.

People occasionally wonder who chooses which readings are used in our church services on Sundays, and by that I mean the ones which appear on our weekly sheet. This Sunday of the year offers an ideal opportunity to explain this, as the church's new year (and that includes a new scheme of readings) begins next weekend, on Advent Sunday; today is the *last* Sunday of what we call our liturgical year, which is now coming to a close.

When we talk about a scheme of readings prescribed by the authorities of the wider church for use in local churches, the word we use is the *Lectionary*. Each year a Lectionary booklet, which is a published scheme of readings, printed in tables, is produced, and clergy and preachers need to go out and get a copy of a little book which looks like this.

It gives details of set readings for Sundays and weekdays and festivals, usually between the First Sunday of Advent until the Sunday before advent of the following year. The lectionary we use is the *Common Worship Lectionary*, the idea of which was conceived in 1999. It differs from the old Book of Common Prayer lectionary, and from lectionaries in use by the Roman Catholic Church. Most Church of England Churches now use the Common Worship Lectionary, and are already gearing up to adopt its provisions for the church's new year, which begins next week.

When the Common Worship Lectionary was inaugurated in 1999, bishop Kenneth Stevenson set out the reason for having a lectionary at all. He wrote that 'the Church of England should adhere to a lectionary because it makes available the riches of the Old Testament and the New Testament over a period of years'.

Having some kind of set scheme of readings is important, because churches which don't may end up preferring specific books of the Bible, or even specific chapters and verses, and end up neglecting many others which they find challenging or difficult, or which are needed to give 'a complete picture' of an idea or theme.

A lectionary forces churches to use, in Sunday and daily prayer and worship, *the full breadth* of scripture, even parts which are contentious or hard to interpret.

Christians believe in the importance of the whole Bible, not just selected bits of it and the lectionary causes most, if not all, of it to be covered, especially for people who do the readings for daily prayer in the morning and evenings.

It's also a matter of church order: the idea that readings are set by the Church Authorities, and the local churches adhere to a scheme which is detailed and sensible. It could mean that if you are worshipping in a different parish church one week, you will nevertheless find that the readings carry on in the same way,

Today's Common Worship Lectionary, has a three year repeating cycle, and aims to allow the gospels, in particular, to speak individually for themselves. In each year, one of the first three gospels is majored on.

The years are known as A, B and C, with the spotlight on Matthew's Gospel in Year A; on Mark's in Year B and Luke's in Year C.

We have just got the end of a 'Year C': and today's Gospel reading was - appropriately enough - from Luke. Year A begins next week, with Matthew's Gospel featuring. To make matters a bit confusing, John's Gospel gets a look-in every year, especially on the Sundays after Epiphany and Easter. Using John's Gospel at these times in the year will actually break the continuity of reading Matthew in the next few months, as it broke into the continuity of reading Luke in the year just gone.

Some preachers look for connections of ideas and themes between the Old and New Testament readings. The old Alternative Service Book Lectionary, used between 1980 and the Year 2000, which was replaced by the common worship lectionary, had a two-year repeating cycle and followed a thematic principle for Sunday readings. So there was usually an obvious thematic connection to be made between the OT, Epistle and Gospel readings and this was an invitation to preachers to draw out a 'free standing' theme (e.g. Social Justice, Creation etc) from the readings.

Some people miss the ASB scheme, because it was good to have a completely free standing and clearly defined teaching-theme each week – after all, people perhaps

only come to church every three or four weeks. Here at Blean we have chosen to choose readings around a theme when we have our 'Second Sunday Special' services.

In the new Common Worship Lectionary, there is a little bit of choice in the period of the Sundays after Trinity where there are two so-called 'tracks' in the lectionary provision. In the so-called 'Related' track, Old Testament readings which might 'tie in' with the Gospel reading are suggested.

But we use the so-called 'continuous' track and that is the one on our readings sheets. In a continuous scheme the Old Testament reading one week can be a continuation of a reading from the same book from the weeks before, and has not normally been chosen to coincide with the Gospel's message.

There are two things to say about all this. One of them is that hearing the Bible readings on Sunday should only form one aspect of people's engagement with the Bible. There are other ways reading and engaging with scripture: an obvious one would be to buy the year's lectionary booklet and read passages from the bible daily under its guidance: morning or evening or both. For Victorian Middle-Class families daily bible reading was an essential part of domestic and family life, but it's less common nowadays!

Another thing you could do is look at Sally's display in church, which has materials produced to help assist and encourage people with various simple schemes of home bible reading and study, offering resources to help with difficult books or passages.

Finally, as I said, the gospel chosen for the year ahead is Matthew. This reminds us that in our Bibles there are 4 gospels. Each one may give accounts of episodes of Jesus' ministry and teaching, and of course we want to hear that. But in each of the 4

gospels what we hear has been framed and described in particular ways by the respective gospel writer.

Luke's portrait of Jesus has important differences from Matthew's and so on. It is our job to hear and understand Jesus' ministry and teaching; but also to take seriously the distinctive emphases in the proclamation of each gospel writer. So today, - as we look back on the previous year we give thanks for Luke's rounded and reassuring depiction of Jesus who had a particular mission to the poor, and preached forgiveness and future hope.

And we look forward to Matthew's somewhat harsher presentation of Jesus as a Jewish messiah offering some surprisingly challenging and uncompromising teaching. Today is Stir Up Sunday. But a lectionary Year A, with its focus on Matthew's Gospel, could also be a 'Stir-up Year'!