

## **Reading the Bible with the Church:**

### **Understanding the Lectionary**

(Fr. Kevin Kraft OP)

#### **I. General notions on the Lectionary**

The Lectionary can be thought of as **the Church's own plan of Scripture study / meditation / celebration / living.**

It is very sophisticated: neither a simplistic, nor 'mechanical', nor arbitrary methodology, as in many non-liturgical Christian denominations, but rather a **time-tested, well-balanced, integral program of hearing and reflecting on the Word of God**, with its roots in the earliest Christian centuries and even before that, based on the Jewish synagogue liturgy and its annual cycle of readings from the Torah, Prophets and Psalms (cf. Lk 24:44).

It is **the Church's pedagogy** of how to 'read' the Scriptures, with a complex interrelation between Old and New Testaments, in which the Gospels are the capstone. And all of this spread out over a fundamental annual cycle which helps Christians to understand the Bible in the context of Jesus' life & ministry, and in the context of our own lives & Christian commitment.

#### **II. The basic structure of the present Lectionary**

**Fifty years ago, the II Vatican Council** revamped the then existing 1-year Lectionary in order to provide Catholic Christians with a "more ample" selection of the Scriptures of both Testaments over the course of several years.

This is the reason for the 3-year **Sunday cycle** (A, B, C) which gives three different readings for each Sunday during three years, with Year "A" giving pride of place to Matthew's Gospel, Year "B" to Mark, and Year "C" to Luke. What of John's Gospel? The number of Sunday readings was also increased from 2 to 3...

**The readings at daily Mass** follow rather a 2-year cycle (Years I & II). There is only a one-year cycle of Gospel readings here, which remains the same every year, passing from Matthew to Mark to Luke in the course of "Ordinary Time". The first readings alternate between the Old and New Testaments every month or two, and over the two-year cycle, provide the most important selections from nearly every book of the Bible (though some books are more extensively read than others).

The effort to revise the Lectionary after Vatican II gave occasion to a major **ecumenical milestone**: several Churches agreed to follow substantially the same 3-year Sunday lectionary (about 90%): at least the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and United Church of Christ now share a common Sunday lectionary!

The Lectionary's not the Church's only program of Biblical reading, either; the Church indicates that there should be Scripture passages read and reflected in **every liturgical action**, whether of sacraments, blessings, burials, or whatever.

### III: A more detailed study of the Lectionary: the case of Advent

A look at the **Sunday readings**: thematic selections, with the same basic Gospel event read from the different Synoptic Gospels in successive years (the same thing occurs in other intensive seasons of the Church Year: Christmas, Lent, Easter...).

A move from the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming (first two weeks, following upon the feast of Christ the King), to the 1<sup>st</sup> coming (last two weeks of Advent).

In the **daily readings**, two slightly unequal periods: in the first, note that the readings from Isaiah are semi-continuous (in order, but jumping over considerable material), while the Gospels appear to be helter-skelter. Upon closer examination... And in the second period, the 9 days preceding Christmas (a sort of Christmas novena), a regressive “count-down” to the solemnity of Christmas, the Gospels are continuous (first Matthew, and then the much longer section of Luke’s Gospel), and the first readings appear to be arbitrary. But once again, upon closer examination...

Note that **Isaiah** appears throughout the Advent season, both in Sundays and weekdays, and is the first reading for all 4 Christmas Masses. From this we can infer a conclusion about the Church’s intention: the Church *reads Isaiah in Advent*, and Advent is the specially favorable, propitious time to read Isaiah. [An even fuller reading of the book is had by those who pray the Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours, which in Advent has *other* selections from Isaiah, also semi-continuous, throughout the season.] This is a Church tradition which comes from the first millennium of Christianity; it is a *liturgical* reading of Isaiah, much older and even more authorized, fuller than a strictly *exegetical* reading. This is perhaps because Isaiah, in its three parts (pre-exilic, exilic, post-exilic) with its theme of the “house of David” and the coming Messiah, is a sort of microcosm of all of salvation history, and has been dubbed the “Gospel of the Old Testament”, not without some reason. It is also the prophetic book that is by far the most quoted in the New Testament. [Somewhat the same dynamic applies to the liturgical placement of the “Suffering Servant” songs from Deutero-Isaiah in Holy Week.]

We might take a brief look at the **Lenten-Easter schema** of readings, too. A quick look at the schema of daily and Sunday readings shows that there is no privileged book of the Bible in Lent, as there was in Advent, but you will note that the Old Testament prophets are very frequently read in Lent, with their message of conversion of heart and life. Too, John’s Gospel plays a prominent role in the last few weeks of Lent, especially in Sundays of Year “A” – which have a catechumenal focus (again, a very old Church tradition), and it has an absolutely predominant place in Easter time, along with Acts of the Apostles. Note too, that on throughout the Easter period all the readings are from the New Testament, including *both* first readings on Sundays: this is the Church’s way of celebrating and deepening our understanding of the newness of life in the Resurrection: nothing in the Old Testament can quite prepare the way for the Good News of Christ’s Resurrection.



## LITURGICAL READINGS FOR LENT AND HOLY WEEK

	Ash Wednesday	Joel 2:12-18;	2Cor 5:20 – 6,2	Mt 6,1-6.16-18
	Thursday after Ash Wednesday		Dt 30:15-20	Lk 9:22-25
	Friday after Ash Wednesday		Isa 58:1-9a	Mt 9:14-15
	Saturday after Ash Wednesday		Isa 58:9b-14	Lk 5:27-32
1 <sup>st</sup> Week of Lent: the <b>Temptation</b> of Christ	A	Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Rom 5:12-19; Matt 4:1-11	Lev 19:1-2.11-18 Isa 55:10-11	Mt 25:31-46 Mt 6:7-15
	B	Gen 9:8-15; 1 Peter 3:18-262; Mark 1:12-15	Jon 3:1-10 Est C:12,14-16,23-25c	Lk 11:29-32 Mt 7:7-12
	C	Dt 26:4-10; Rom 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13	Ez 18:21-28 Dt 26:16-19	Mt 5:20-26 Mt 5:43-48
2 <sup>nd</sup> Week of Lent: the <b>Transfiguration</b> of Christ	A	Gen 12:1-4; 2 Tim 1:8-10; Matt 17:1-9	Dn 9:4b-10 Isa 1:10.16-20	Lk 6:36-38 Mt 23:1-12
	B	Gen 22:1-2.9-18; Rom 8:31-34; Mark 9:2-10	Jer 18:18-20 Jer 17:5-10	Mt 20:17-28 Lk 16:19-31
	C	Gen 15:5-12.17-18; Phil 3:17-4,1 Luke 9:28-36	Gn 37:3s.12s.17-28 Mi 7:14-15.18-20	Mt 21:33-43.45s Lk 15:1ss.11-32
3 <sup>rd</sup> Week of Lent: <b>The Samaritan</b> <b>Woman (A)</b>	A	Ex 17:3-7; Rom 5:1-2.5-8; Jn 4:5-42	2 Kgs 5:1-15a Dan 3:25.34-43	Lk 4:24-30 Mt 18:21-35
	B	Ex 20:1-17; 1 Cor 1:22-25; Jn 2:13-25	Dt 4:1.5-9 Jer 7:23-28	Mt 5:17-19 Lk 11:14-23
	C	Ex 3:1-8.13-15; 1 Cor 10:1-6.10ss Lk 13:1-9	Hos 14:2-10 Hos 6:1-6	Mk 12:28b-34 Lk 18:19-24
4 <sup>th</sup> Week of Lent: <b>The Man Born</b> <b>Blind (A)</b>	A	1 Sm 16:1-6.7.10-13; Eph 5: 8-15 Jn 9:1-14	Isa 65:17-21 Ez 47:1-9-12	Jn 4:43-54 Jn 5:1-3a.5-16
	B	2 Ch 36:14-17.19-23; Eph 2:4-10 Jn 3:14-21	Isa 49:8-15 Ex 32:7-14	Jn 5:17-30 Jn 5:31-47
	C	Jos 5:9.10-12; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3.11-32	Wis 2:1a.12-22 Jer 11:18-20	Jn 7:1-2.10.25-30 Jn 7:40-53
5 <sup>th</sup> Week of Lent: <b>Resurrection of</b> <b>Lazarus (A)</b>	A	Ezk 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11:1-45	Dn 13:1-62 (select. vss) Num 21:4-9	Jn 8:1-11 [C 12-20] Jn 8:21-30
	B	Jer 31:31-34; Heb 5:7-9; Jn 12:20-33	Dn 3:14-20.91-92.95 Gen 17:3-9	Jn 8:31-42 Jn 8:51-59
	C	Is 43:16-21; Phil 3:8-14; Jn 8:1-11	Jer 20:10-13 Ez 37:21-28	Jn 10:31-42 Jn 11:45-56
Palm or Passion Sunday / Holy Week: <b>The Passion of</b> <b>the Lord</b>	A	Is 50:4-7; Phil 2:6-11 Matt 26:14 – 27,66	Isa 42:1-7 Isa 49:1-6	Jn 12:1-11 Jn13:21-33.36-38
	B	Is 50:4-7; Phil 2:6-11 Mark 14:1 – 15:47	Isa 50:4-9a Isa 61:1-3a.6a.8b-9;	Mt 26:14-25 Lk 4:16-21
	C	Is 50:4-7; Phil 2:6-11 Luke 22:14 – 23:56	Rev 1:5-8	
<b>Holy Thursday:</b>	Lord's Supper	Ex 12:1-8.11-14	1 Cor 11:23-26	Jn 13:1-15
<b>Good Friday</b>	Euch. Celebr.	Isa 52:13 – 53,12	Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9	Jn 18:1 – 19:42
<b>Holy Saturday</b>	no Mass today	-----		
<b>Easter Sunday</b>	Paschal Vigil	Gen; Ex; Isa; Ba; Ez	Rom 6:3-11	Mt / Mk / Lk
	Mass at dawn	Acts 10:34.37-43	Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:5.6b-8	Jn 20:1-9
	Daytime Mass	Acts 10:34.37-43	Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:5.6b-8	Lk 24:1-12
	Evening Mass	Acts 10:34.37-43	Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:5.6b-8	Lk 24:13-35

## LITURGICAL READINGS FOR THE EASTER SEASON

Octave of Easter: (= 1 <sup>st</sup> week of Easter)	See "Easter Sunday" at the end of the previous page.  [Only the Easter Vigil has different gospels for years A, B, and C.]	Acts 2;14.22.32	Mt 28:8-15	
		Acts 2:36-41	Jn 20:11-18	
		Acts 3:1-10	Lk 24:13-35	
		Acts 3:11-26	Lk 24:35-48	
		Acts 4:1-12	Jn 21:1-14	
2 <sup>nd</sup> Week of Easter: Apparition a week later	A Acts 2:42.47; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31	Acts 4:23-31	Jn 3:1-8	
		Acts 4:32-37	Jn 3:7-15	
		B Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31	Acts 5:17-26	Jn 3:16.21
		Acts 5:27-33	Jn 3:31-36	
3 <sup>rd</sup> Week of Easter:  <b>More Apparitions</b>	C Acts 5:12-16; Rev 1;9-13.17-19 John 20:19-31	Acts 5:34-42	Jn 6:1-15	
		Acts 6:1-7	Jn 6:16-21	
		A Acts 2;14.22.28; 1 Peter 1:17-21; Lk 24:13-35	Acts 6:8-15	Jn 6:22-29
		Acts 7:51 - 8;1	Jn 6:30-35	
Bread of Life Disc. (weekdays)	B Acts 3:13-15.17-19; 1 Jn 2:1-5; Lk 24:35.48	Acts 8:1-8	Jn 6:35-40	
		Acts 8:26-40	Jn 6:44-51	
		C Acts 5:27-32.40-41; Rev 5:11-14; John 21:1-19	Acts 9:1-20	Jn 6:52-59
		Acts 9:31-42	Jn 6:60-69	
4 <sup>th</sup> Week of Easter: <b>Good Shepherd</b> (Vocations)	A Acts 2;14.36-41; 1 Peter 2:20-25; John 10:1-10	Acts 11:1-18	Jn 10:1-10 [A 11-18]	
		Acts 11:19-26	Jn 10:22-30	
		B Acts 4:8-12; 1 Jn 3:1-2; John 10:11-18	Acts 12:24 - 13:5	Jn 12:44-50
		Acts 13:13-25	Jn 13:16-20	
5 <sup>th</sup> Week of Easter:	C Acts 13:14.43-52; Rev 7:9.14-17 John 10;27-30	Acts 13:26-33	Jn 14:1-6	
		Acts 13:44-52	Jn 14:7-14	
		A Acts 6:1-7; 1 Peter 2:4-9; John 14:1-12	Acts 14:5-18	Jn 14:21-26
		Acts 14:19-28	Jn 14:27-31	
6 <sup>th</sup> Week of Easter:	B Acts 9:26-31; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8	Acts 15:1-6	Jn 15:1-8	
		Acts 15:7-21	Jn 15:9-11	
		C Acts 14:21-27; Rev 21:1-5; John 13:31-33.34-35	Acts 15:22-31	Jn 15:12-17
		Acts 16:1-10	Jn 15:18-21	
7 <sup>th</sup> Week of Easter:  Ascension /	A Acts 8;5-8.14-17; 1 Peter 3;15.18 John 14:15-21	Acts 16:11-15	Jn 15:26 - 16:4	
		Acts 16:22-34	Jn 16:5-11	
		B Acts 10:25-26,34-38; 1 Jn 4:7-10 John 15:9-17	Acts 17:15.22 - 18:1	Jn 16:12-15
		Acts 18:1-8	Jn 16:16-20	
Easter:	C Acts 15:1-2.22-29; Rv 21:10-14.22s John 14:23-29	Acts 18:9-18	Jn 16:20-23	
		Acts 18:23-28	Jn 16:23-28	
		A Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Matt 28:16-20 [7 <sup>th</sup> : Jn 17:1-11a]	Acts 19:1-8	Jn 16:29-33
		Acts 20:17-27	Jn 17:1-11	
Easter:	B Acts 1:1-11; Eph 4:1-13; Mark 16:15-20 [7 <sup>th</sup> : Jn 17:11b-19]	Acts 20:28-38	Jn 17:11-19	
		Acts 22:30; 23:6-11	Jn 17:20-26	
		C Acts 1:1-11; Heb 9:24-28; 10:19-23 Luke 24:46-53 [7 <sup>th</sup> : Jn 17:20-26]	Acts 25:13-21	Jn 21:15-19
Acts 28:16-20.30-31	Jn 21:20-25			
Pentecost Sunday	Vigil: Gen 11 / Ex 19 / Ez 37 / Jl 3 Rom 8:22-27 Jn 7:37-39	<b>Ordinary time</b> resumes after Pentecost, taking up from the week after the one interrupted by the beginning of Lent (Ash Wednesday)		
				Day: Acts 2:1-11
				1 Cor 12:2-7.12-13 / Rom 8:8-27 Jn 20:19-23 / Jn 14:15-16.23b-26