

# The Lectionary

*Lection* is Latin for “a reading,” so a lectionary is simply a book or table of readings. More particularly, the lectionary is a selection of biblical texts arranged according to the calendar and intended for public reading during a church’s worship. Usually, the four readings for a Sunday include an Old Testament passage followed by a responsorial psalm, then a text from an epistle and lastly a Gospel reading. In many churches, the sermons tend to focus on the lectionary readings.

The idea of prescribing Scripture readings and reflections for public worship dates back to the ancient Jews. It is likely that when Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Luke 4, he was reading the assigned text for that day. By the fourth century, the church had developed a lectionary of readings to use in conjunction with the liturgical calendar. Thus the lectionary has long been central in the worship of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches and in certain Protestant traditions, such as Anglican and Lutheran.

The Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s sought to encourage in the Catholic church a “warm and living love of Scripture” in part through a wider variety of readings in worship and more scriptural preaching by the clergy.\* As a result, in 1969 the church produced for worldwide use a new Roman Lectionary for Mass based on a three-year cycle of readings. (The previous one had a one-year cycle, as is still the case in Orthodox churches.) Almost immediately, mainline Protestant churches began creating lectionaries based on the new Roman version. By 1983, a Common Lectionary unified the proliferating versions and, after further review, the Revised Common Lectionary was issued in 1992 and is used now by most liturgically oriented churches in North America.

The lectionary provides three annual cycles of readings, labeled simply Year A, Year B and Year C. Each starts with the first Sunday of Advent and concludes with Reign of Christ Sunday. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are featured respectively in Years A, B and C. John

\**The Revised Common Lectionary: The Consultation on Common Texts* (Winfield, B.C.: Wood Lake, 1992), p. 75.

is read around Christmas, Lent and Easter each year. From Advent through Pentecost, the Old Testament and New Testament readings are thematically linked. For Ordinary Time, churches have a choice between two patterns: paired readings as above, or semicontinuous readings in which large segments of Old Testament books are read in order over a number of weeks. The lectionary passages for feast days and holy days, such as Christmas, Ash Wednesday and Trinity Sunday remain the same each year, regardless of the A, B, C cycle. The Roman Catholic Lectionary and Revised Common Lectionary can be accessed easily online.

The beauty of the lectionary lies in this: every Sunday, millions of Christians worldwide are hearing the same Scriptures read and preached in their church gatherings; we are united into one church, worshiping the same God, under the same Word, by the same illuminating Spirit!