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The Lessons at the Daily Services

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THE PRESENT ARTICLE is the last of a group of three in which some aspects of the daily services are considered. The first¹ was an extended review of the proposed Series 3 forms for Morning and Evening Prayer, while the second² was devoted to the use of the psalms in these services. In this final article attention is directed to the provision of the lessons at the weekday services. Nothing will be said here in detail about the lectionary provision for the Eucharist and Offices on Sundays and Holy Days, because the general principles on which recent lectionaries have been constructed seem to be right. In particular it is no longer realistic to assume sufficient continuity in the congregations at the Sunday Offices to make a reduced *lectio continua* at these services worthwhile. Nor will the question of non-biblical lessons at the weekday services be considered further.³ But the biblical lessons at the weekday services are under active reconsideration by the Liturgical Commission, and the time seems opportune for a consideration of some of the principles that need to be taken into account in framing a lectionary.

Part of Cranmer's simplification of the medieval Offices lay in the provision of a lectionary based on the civil calendar, in which the books of the Bible were largely read in course, the Old Testament continuously over mornings and evenings, the Gospels and Acts continuously at Mattins and the Epistles at Evensong. For the most part whole chapters were read as lessons, although the chapter divisions were of medieval origin and did not always correspond to the sense. A concession to the ancient connection of Isaiah with Advent was made by reading it at the end of the series in late November and December. The great merit of this system was the emphasis it laid on reading the Bible as a whole; over the year the daily worshipper became familiar with Scripture in its totality, and the simplicity and comprehensiveness of the system were a deliberate return to the principle of *lectio continua* which had been largely lost sight of in the medieval services.⁴ The 1922

lectionary broke new ground in reverting to the ecclesiastical rather than the civil calendar as its basis, and by making a practically complete separation of the weekday from the Sunday lessons (though something had been done to provide Proper Lessons for Sundays and Holy Days in earlier revisions). The 1922 lectionary also restored the ancient connection of Genesis and Exodus with Septuagesima and Lent. The 1961 lectionary was essentially a fairly conservative improvement of that of 1922, and was based on similar lines. The lectionary on which the annual calendars in common use are currently based is the one printed in *Morning and Evening Prayer, Series 2 Revised*, itself largely derived from that published in *The Daily Office*.⁶ We shall refer to this for convenience as the current lectionary, though in fact some people are still using earlier lectionaries. The current lectionary has been framed on several quite new principles, which need to be considered in some detail.

The most striking innovation in the current lectionary is that provision is made basically for three lessons a day rather than four. An Old Testament and a Gospel lesson are provided for Mattins each day, and a single lesson, from the Acts or an Epistle, for Evensong. Each course of lessons is thus self-contained, and there is therefore no continuity between morning and evening (as there is with the psalms, and has been with at least the Old Testament lessons in earlier lectionaries). Another innovation is the division of the lectionary into a double cycle spread over two years. There is a fair amount of duplication of New Testament material over the two years, but very little of the Old Testament is read in both years. This makes possible the provision for those who wish to continue the tradition of reading an Old Testament lesson at Evensong as well as at Mattins to do so by using the Old Testament lesson appointed for the other year. Those who follow this practice, and it is encouraged by the publishing of these lessons in the annual almanacks, cover the whole of the Old Testament provision every year.

It is much to be desired that the traditional Anglican pattern of two lessons at each service, one from the Old and one from the New Testament, should be restored as normative. Apart from the intrinsic importance of reading the Old Testament, this pattern is inherent in the structure of the services, where the Benedictus and Magnificat are placed between the lessons to bridge the transition from the Old to the New Testament. But even if this is not done, the provision for an optional Old Testament lesson at Evensong is satisfactory, and there is everything to be said for the two cycles of Old Testament lessons alternating between the morning and evening from year to year. In any case the provision of self-contained sequences of lessons at each service is to be welcomed. There have always been laity who have been able to attend one Office fairly regularly, but not both, and it is obviously much more satisfactory from their point of view that the courses of lessons at a

particular service should be continuous. The regular worshipper at one daily service will still hear the whole cycle over a period of two years.

More problematic is the division between Gospel lessons in the mornings, and lessons from the rest of the New Testament in the evenings. This seems to have its basis in the desire in some quarters to use Mattins in place of the first part of the Eucharist on weekdays. This is not nearly so simple a question as at first appears. It has generally been held to be axiomatic that there should always be a Gospel reading at the Eucharist, though even this principle has been questioned, and it is clearly convenient in places where the Eucharist is celebrated daily in conjunction with Mattins to have a Gospel reading at that service. But this is by no means the normal situation. Outside cathedrals, religious communities and theological colleges a daily celebration is the exception rather than the rule, and where there is a daily celebration it is sometimes preceded or followed by Mattins as a distinct and self-contained service, and sometimes held at a later time in the day. Indeed it would not be surprising to see a development of a daily celebration after or in conjunction with Evensong in a number of parishes in coming years. While some therefore may be suited by an unvarying Gospel lection at Mattins which is also serving as Ante-Communion, others may find themselves reading two Gospel lessons in the mornings, and still others embarrassed by not having a Gospel lesson at Evensong. There are also the laity who can only attend Evensong to be considered; are they never to hear a Gospel lesson?

The best solution to this complex practical problem may well be to provide for those who wish to use the Office in place of Ante-Communion by a rubric directing that where the New Testament lesson appointed is not from the Gospels a short Gospel lection should be read in addition. This would leave the provision for the Offices to be considered on its own merits, and experience suggests that some alternation between Gospel and other readings is the most satisfactory arrangement at both services. It might not be practicable so to dovetail the series of readings that there was always a Gospel reading at one service on a particular day, but this would not matter so long as the general balance was maintained. If it were felt to be essential to provide a Gospel reading every day, one possible course would be to have two complete cycles for the year, one of Gospel readings only, the other of non-Gospel readings, which would alternate between morning and evening from year to year. But this would probably be too rigid to be wholly satisfactory. One detailed provision of the 1922 lectionary could be restored with profit, viz. the reading of Luke-Acts in sequence as a continuous work.

Another indirect effect of the planning of the current lectionary with a view to the use of the Office in place of the Ante-Communion, has been to reduce the length of the passages appointed and at times to adopt an anthological approach in place of the principle of *lectio continua*. This again is a complex question. It is certainly true that

the amount of material provided in some of the readings in the older lectionaries was more than could be readily assimilated at a hearing, and this is particularly the case in some of the Gospel and prophetic lessons. On the other hand much of the Old Testament consists of narrative, where a certain flow is necessary if continuity is not to be lost and the hearers' interest is not to flag. A striking example of this defect may be found in the current lectionary, where the Joseph story is spread out over four weeks. One has the impression (as with the psalms) that a decision has been taken in principle on the desirable length of a lesson, and the material then divided into units corresponding as closely as possible to these ideal dimensions. This is to ignore the differences in the nature of the material. Surely the right course is to follow the natural divisions suggested by the subject-matter, and to accept the fact that this will entail some imbalance in the actual length of particular lessons. On the whole narrative passages, especially sustained narratives like the Joseph story or the 'Court History' of David, are best read in fairly substantial episodes so as to maintain continuity. In the synoptic Gospels on the other hand brief narratives abound, and the readings here can afford to be much shorter. In the Epistles, and the Wisdom and prophetic literature, where the material is discursive rather than narrative, the passages should generally be as short as is consistent with the natural divisions of the argument. An example in the current lectionary where prophetic material is excellently divided according to the sense into passages of exactly the right length is Isaiah 1-6. One problem which every lectionary has to face is that there is a great deal more of the Old Testament than of the New, and this may be partly met by allowing longer passages to be read from the narrative books, as well as by providing for more frequent reading of parts of the New Testament.

The signs of an anthological approach must also be viewed with caution. The *lectio continua*, or reading books of the Bible through as a whole, is one of the basic purposes of at least the ferial Office.* The provision of lessons at the Eucharist is rightly made on a different principle. Here what is required is a group of fairly short passages with a common theme for any one celebration, and a Eucharistic lectionary thus necessarily has an anthological flavour. It is certainly appropriate that the lessons for the Office on festivals should be chosen in a similar manner, and as we have seen it is no longer realistic to assume sufficient continuity in congregational attendance at the Sunday Offices to make any attempt at a modified *lectio continua* for ordinary Sundays practicable, though this has been done in earlier lectionaries for instance for the Sundays after Trinity. But the ordinary weekday services are in a different category. Most of those who attend them may be presumed to do so with some degree of regularity, and some kind of continuous reading of the books of the Bible has always been followed at these services.

It is clearly right and natural that the anthological approach should supersede the *lectio continua* at the major festival seasons—the Christmas period, Holy Week and Easter Week, and Whit Week—and this has been done since 1922. It is sometimes possible to arrange some overlap with the *lectio continua* even at these times, as was done in 1961 by reading the Johannine last supper discourses during Holy Week, and short books of the Old Testament can be fitted into the pattern in this way, e.g. Lamentations during Holy Week, and Ruth during the Christmas season as in the original (1955) version of the 1961 lectionary. But the current lectionary shows some disquieting extensions of this principle. The Old Testament lessons from Advent 3 (Advent 2 in Year 2) to Christmas are selected on an anthological basis. Conversely certain passages which have been used in anthological selections are omitted from their natural place in the *lectio continua*. A particularly absurd example of this is the reading of verses 1-17 only of 2 Kings 4 in the week of Easter 4, the conclusion of the narrative in verses 18-37 having been read in an Easter Week anthology the previous year! Some repetition is inevitable when ‘purple passages’ are read out of context at festival seasons; their omission from the *lectio continua* frustrates its very purpose, which is to see a stretch of the Bible as a whole. It is this purpose which provides *raison d’être* of the system, and compensates for the reading on certain days of passages which have little inspirational content in themselves, but which are important as part of a cumulative reading of Scripture. The most serious effects however of this anthological approach are to be seen in the treatment of certain parts of the Old Testament, where in what purports to be *lectio continua* the passages provided are highly selective. Examples may readily be found in Hosea, Job and Proverbs, and there are also surprising omissions from the middle chapters of Deuteronomy and from parts of Samuel and Kings. Alongside this is to be set the inclusion of some passages of doubtful importance (Judges 17-18, Ezekiel 26 and 32) which were omitted in earlier lectionaries.

Any lectionary based on the ecclesiastical year is necessarily governed by the Calendar, and the current lectionary does in fact reflect the major changes proposed in the Calendar as long ago as 1969,⁷ though not yet formally adopted. The major changes which are relevant to the week-day lectionary are two, the effective beginning of the ecclesiastical year on the Ninth Sunday before Christmas, giving a pre-Advent period of five weeks, and the change in emphasis in the two and a half weeks preceding Lent (though it is to be noted that the Easter cycle still begins on the Ninth Sunday before Easter). The medieval tradition, restored in the 1922 and 1961 lectionaries, began the *lectio continua* of the Old Testament on Septuagesima Sunday, and thus almost accidentally lent to this particular Sunday a connection with the theme of Creation. In the new Calendar this theme is placed on the Ninth Sunday before *Christmas*, and thus assumes a logical position at the beginning of the

ecclesiastical year. As we shall see shortly, this has given rise to a serious problem. But it also has the effect of leaving the pre-Lent period without any obvious point of attachment in the *lectio continua*. Yet further implications for the lectionary would follow from the often mooted fixed Easter if it were to be adopted. The present movement of Easter allows in effect an extra three or four weeks to the time available for accommodating the Biblical material, though these weeks cannot be guaranteed in any particular year. This has the advantage that some less important passages can find a place in the lectionary, even though they may only be read occasionally. The disadvantage is that particularly in the Epiphany period any attempt to plan the reading of a particular book is threatened by the probability that the sequence will as often as not be broken off in mid-course. On the whole a fixed Easter, giving a guaranteed four weeks after Epiphany and only an occasional fifth week, would make a more satisfactory lectionary possible. But there would certainly be greater difficulty in finding time to read all the material desirable.

Before considering the implications of the new Calendar for the lectionary, it is worth asking whether the new proposals for the Calendar are radical enough! Would it not be more logical and satisfactory to have an Advent of from five to seven weeks concerned solely with preparation for Christmas, and culminating in the Feast of the Annunciation on the Sunday before Christmas (a Sunday when the popular mood cries out for some joyful and festive anticipation of Christmas, and on which in many churches services of lessons and carols are held)? The theme of the Second Advent and the Last Things could then be rescued from near oblivion and assigned to a specified period of three or four weeks at the end of the Trinity season, as is the case in the German Lutheran lectionary. This would overlap with All Saints' Day and Remembrance Sunday, when again the popular mood would be sympathetic to an emphasis on the Last Things. There might even be something to be said for diverting All Saints' Day from November 1st to the Last Sunday after Trinity, making it the climax of the ecclesiastical year. In most years it suffers from the usual neglect of weekday festivals, and it is interesting that the Greek Orthodox Church observes All Saints on a Sunday (in fact the Sunday after Pentecost, which we observe as Trinity Sunday). Finally it is worth asking whether one or two other weekday festivals (the Annunciation and Transfiguration come particularly to mind) should not be removed altogether from the traditional calendar dates to the Sundays where they provide the main theme in the new eucharistic lectionary. This would avoid a sense of duplication, and enhance the importance of these festivals in the mind of the Sunday worshipper.

A particular criticism has been levelled at the new Calendar and its implications for the lectionary by the Rev. M. Moreton.⁸ He criticises the current lectionary for undermining the traditional connection of

Genesis and Exodus with the pre-Easter period by transferring the reading of these books to the pre-Christmas period. This is in fact only partly true, since Exodus is read in the weeks following Easter. Mr. Moreton goes on to demonstrate the antiquity, universality and theological relevance of the link between Genesis and Exodus and the pre-Easter period. To this argument it may be replied that the primal myths of Creation and the Fall form the background and presuppositions of the Incarnation just as much as of the Redemption of mankind, and that it is just as logical to read these early chapters of Genesis (1-11) at the beginning of the pre-Christmas period as at the beginning of the pre-Easter period. But the same cannot be said of the Exodus traditions, which are much more closely related to Easter and the events leading up to it. Indeed neither the old nor the current lectionaries seem to have dealt with Exodus entirely satisfactorily. The 1922 and 1961 lectionaries completed Exodus and Numbers during Lent, resuming the Pentateuch at Deuteronomy after Easter. The current lectionary does not begin Exodus until after Easter, and does not complete it until after Trinity Sunday. If we are really to be governed by thematic relevance, the right course is surely to begin Exodus towards the end of Lent, to reach Passover at Easter, and to complete the book in the post-Easter period. If on the other hand we are persuaded that the most logical place for Genesis 1-11 is at the beginning of the new ecclesiastical year, we are compelled to admit a break in the continuous reading of Genesis and Exodus. Where should this break come? In the current lectionary it comes at the end of Genesis, the whole of which is read in the pre-Advent period. But this is not satisfactory, because the Joseph story at least is the immediate prelude to the Exodus narrative, and the patriarchal traditions as a whole have a closer affinity to the Exodus narrative than to the primal myths. Accordingly the most suitable procedure would be to read Genesis 1-11 only in the pre-Advent period, and to make a fresh start with Genesis 12 (or 11.27) at the beginning of the pre-Easter period, continuing straight into Exodus and reaching the Passover by Easter, as outlined above.

The division of the reading of the Old Testament over two years, or at least into two independent cycles, raises a further set of problems. Of these the most serious is that of the broad sweep of narrative material from Genesis 12 to 2 Kings. The current lectionary divides Genesis between the two years in the pre-Advent period, and then divides the remaining matter into two blocks. Samuel and Kings are read in one year from the Monday after Septuagesima to the Saturday after Trinity Sunday, while Exodus-Judges are read in the other year from the Monday after Easter 1 to the Saturday after Trinity 11. This does not serve the interests of continuity, and the content of Samuel and Kings has no thematic relevance to Lent or Easter. It would surely be more satisfactory for the main sequence of historical books to be read in one

year, the other containing a greater proportion of Wisdom and prophetic material. The provision of Jeremiah for Lenten reading in the current lectionary, though a break with tradition, has proved appropriate. There are a few ways in which the balance could be redressed to some extent between the two years. Most of Deuteronomy for instance could easily be read apart from Exodus—Numbers, and retain the appropriate connection it has had with the Easter period in 1922 and 1961. The continuous narrative would thus consist of Genesis 12-50, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Jeremiah and Deuteronomy would cover the Lent and Easter period of the other year, while the work of the Chronicler (1 and 2 Chronicles with Ezra and Nehemiah—originally a consecutive narrative) could be read in the weeks after Trinity. This would do greater justice to the Chronicler than the practice of occasionally supplementing the reading of Samuel and Kings with chapters from Chronicles, as has been pointed out by Professors D. R. Jones⁹ and P. R. Ackroyd.¹⁰ The post-exilic prophets could well be read in connection with Ezra and Nehemiah, the whole providing a reasonable counterpart to Joshua-2 Kings in the Trinity period. A certain balance between the two years might also be achieved by reading Jeremiah and Ezekiel, or Job and Proverbs, respectively in alternate years.

A further problem concerns the reading of Apocryphal lessons. In the current lectionary these are always provided with an alternative from the Old Testament. As far as Sunday lessons are concerned this is probably right, since some have conscientious scruples about reading Apocryphal passages as Scripture lessons, and it can in any case be argued that there is hardly time in a two-year cycle to read all the major passages from the Old Testament. But the extension of this principle to the weekday lectionary is more questionable, and one suspects that it originated in the Joint Liturgical Group's accommodation of certain non-Anglicans who would object on principle to the reading of Apocryphal lessons at any time, though this is not explicitly stated in *The Daily Office*. If so, it is so pertinent to ask whether the principle stated in the sixth Article of Religion, that 'the other Books . . . the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners' is being tacitly modified. It is interesting to recall that in 1549 no less than 106 Apocryphal readings were provided in the *lectio continua*, as compared with 40 in 1871, and 78 in both 1922 and 1961. In none of these cases were Old Testament alternatives provided. On the other hand both the tendency towards shorter lessons and the possibility of a fixed Easter have the effect of reducing the time available in which to cover the material, and the only practicable way to include Apocryphal lessons might become that of allowing them to stand as alternatives to Old Testament passages in certain weeks. In that case there would be something to be said for suggesting in effect a four-year course for the few weeks in the year where this occurs, so that the Apocryphal passages would at least

be read once in four years, rather than be at risk of never being read at all.

The construction of a lectionary, in which the desired readings have to be accommodated to the practicalities of a liturgical calendar, is in fact an extremely complex task, and it is unlikely that a wholly satisfactory lectionary will ever be produced. It is certainly not to be expected that even a reasonably satisfactory lectionary can be constructed in a short period of time, and inevitably the defects of a lectionary become apparent only gradually with its use. A lectionary providing a two-year cycle can only begin to be realistically appraised after four years of use. Moreover the skills required for constructing a lectionary differ somewhat from those ordinarily required by liturgical scholars. It is worth considering whether a small permanent Calendar and Lectionary Commission should not be appointed, with some overlap of membership with the Liturgical Commission, but also some representation of biblical scholarship. Such a commission could act as a clearing-house for detailed criticisms and suggestions made by members of the church, and could be empowered to produce authoritative revisions of the lectionary incorporating improvements at not too frequent intervals. Several other functions might be assigned to such a group. They could for instance determine in which years the Apocryphal lessons were to be read. They could produce the data for the annual almanacks, making the necessary adaptations from year to year to accommodate festivals on calendar dates. They might even be empowered to make minor adjustments in this respect from year to year, to obviate duplication of passages occurring on a Holy Day and in the *lectio continua* on almost adjacent days. At the time of writing, for instance, one of the proper lessons for the Transfiguration occurred again in the *lectio continua* of St. Luke on the following day, while an important passage (9. 18-27) which was superseded on the festival was lost altogether from the sequence. This kind of loose end is always liable to occur when a lectionary is worked out to fit the calendar requirements of a particular year, and it would be as well for an authorised body to have the power to make such minor adjustments as may be required from time to time.¹¹

FOOTNOTES

¹ Vol. 89, no. 1, pp. 58-65.

² Vol. 89, no. 4, pp. 267-275.

³ Something was written on this question in the first article, vol. 89, no. 1, p. 63.

⁴ Cf. 'Concerning the Service of the Church' at the beginning of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

⁵ Ed. R. C. D. Jasper, SPCK and Epworth Press, 1968.

⁶ Cf. D. R. Jones, 'Corporate Attention to the Whole Word of God', *Theology*, LXX, 1967, pp. 146-152.

⁷ *The Calendar and Lessons for the Church's Year*. A Report of the Church of England Liturgical Commission (SPCK, 1969).

⁸ 'The Calendar and Lectionary: The Question of Principle', *Theology*, LXXVI, 1973, pp. 369-374.

⁹ *The Teachers' Commentary*, Revised Edition, 1955, p. 216.

¹⁰ *Torch Commentary* on I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, p. 22.

¹¹ I should like to thank Canon Professor D. R. Jones and Canon E. C. Whitaker for kindly reading an earlier draft of this article and making helpful criticisms and suggestions.