

The Revised Common Lectionary

Roger Beckwith

The lectionary of the Church of England has gone through an interesting evolution, which, by way of background to the latest developments, we will begin by briefly reviewing.

Cranmer's Lectionary

In Cranmer's First Prayer Book of 1549, the earliest liturgy in English, and also in his Second Prayer Book of 1552, the lectionary appeared as a lectionary for twelve months, January to December, providing Old Testament and New Testament lessons for every day of the year, morning and evening, and taking the Church in an orderly fashion, and in the vernacular language, through most of the Old Testament once and most of the New Testament three times. This was one of his most important reforms, and one of the nearest to his heart. Some special lessons for holy days were appointed, but the lessons for Sundays were in the same course as those for weekdays, with the exception of the Epistle and Gospel used on Sundays at Holy Communion. The archbishop's hope was that, when the parson rang the church bell, a good number of laity would come to church for Morning and Evening Prayer, on weekdays as on Sundays, and so would hear consecutive reading of the Bible every day of the week. Since so many of them could not read the Bible for themselves, it was a very worthy hope.

However, by the time of Queen Elizabeth's Prayer Book of 1559, it was already apparent that Cranmer's hope had been unrealistic. Consequently, it was judged necessary to provide special lessons for Sundays, especially from the Old Testament. Since the Old Testament is so large, there was real danger that, otherwise, those attending church only on Sunday would miss all the most significant passages. The special lessons were repetitions of lessons occurring also in the daily course of readings, just like the Epistles and Gospels.

In 1871 (though not everybody realizes it) Cranmer's lectionary was removed from the Prayer Book and a new one was substituted. His lessons were by this time thought unduly long, so it was now provided that the

New Testament should be read through twice every year, not three times. There were some other changes, and alternatives were now added to half the special lessons for Sundays.

The 1922 Lectionary

In 1922 an alternative lectionary was added. Like the 1871 lectionary, it was submitted to Parliament for approval, and was accepted, so it is printed, alongside the other, in some editions of the Prayer Book. In this lectionary, for the first time, a full set of special Sunday lessons, New Testament as well as Old Testament, was provided. The effect was to give the Sunday lessons a new prominence, as the most important lessons, instead of being just an appendix to the daily lessons. This was underlined by arranging the lectionary according to the Christian year and beginning it on Advent Sunday, not January 1st. The daily and Sunday readings were now following the same calendar, and this made it possible to keep them in parallel, taking them from much the same parts of Scripture, and printing them in the same table, as related but distinct. The new pattern has been followed in all subsequent lectionaries. Forms of the 1922 lectionary were introduced into the 1926 Irish Prayer Book and into the proposed English Prayer Book of 1928.

In 1961 a revision of the 1922 lectionary was authorized by Convocation, though, as it did not go to Parliament, it lacked full authority. It developed the alternative readings for Sundays, provided since 1871, into a double set of Sunday readings, to be spread over two years. A lectionary on these lines was immediately adopted for the Canadian Prayer Book, and has been much appreciated in Canada. The change had been anticipated in Scotland, where, since 1929, three sets of Sunday readings had been provided in the Prayer Book lectionary, to be spread over three years, not two. A two-year or three-year course of readings means that the same passage is not read so frequently, but that, in time, more of Scripture can be covered.

The ASB Lectionary

Before long, things were on the move again. In the wake of the Parish Communion movement, the Epistles and Gospels at Holy Communion were reviewed. The report of the ecumenical Joint Liturgical Group, *The Calendar and Lectionary*, published in 1967, reflected the idea that, not only are the Sunday lessons the main lessons of the lectionary, but the readings at Holy Communion should be treated as the main Sunday lessons. It therefore set out a new course of readings for Holy

Communion, and spread these over two years, like the office readings. It added an Old Testament reading at Holy Communion, in the expectation that the service would often replace Morning or Evening Prayer. It also grouped the lessons round a Sunday theme throughout the year, instead of just in festival periods as previously, and abolished the old practice of reading, at other times, selected passages, in sequence, of one biblical book after another – what is sometimes called semi-continuous reading.

The Anglican members of the Joint Liturgical Group for a long time dominated it, and the Liturgical Commission's 1968 report *The Calendar and Lessons* reflected the same thinking as the Group's reports. It added readings for 'a Second Sunday Service', and by the time of the *Alternative Service Book 1980* readings for a third Sunday service had been added, ie for Morning and Evening Prayer as well as for Holy Communion, all three loosely linked by the Sunday theme, and the whole series spread over two years. A two-year daily lectionary was also added. The *ASB* scheme came into widespread use in the Church of England, and it gained some acceptance outside as well, for example among the Methodists and in the Church of Ireland.

The Revised Common Lectionary

To those who still use the 1871 lectionary printed in the Prayer Book, subsequent developments can only look like a revolution. And now we are faced with further change. Ingenious and enterprising though the work of the Joint Liturgical Group was (and it affected the calendar as well as the lectionary), it has not satisfied more than its own generation of liturgiologists. There had been a Roman Catholic observer on the Joint Liturgical Group, but Rome was concurrently engaged in an independent enterprise of liturgical revision, authorized by the Second Vatican Council. This resulted, among other things, in an adventurous new lectionary for use at mass, published in 1969. The *ordo lectionum missae* is like the contemporary English scheme in providing three readings at the Eucharist, but the readings are spread over three years not two, and they are linked by a theme only in festival periods, semi-continuous reading being practised at other times of the year. The new Roman lectionary has attracted much interest from Anglican liturgical commissions, and revised forms of it have been introduced in North America and Australia. Now an English revision has also been produced, under the name of the *Revised Common Lectionary*, and this has been approved by the General Synod for experimental use in the Church of England as from Advent 1997 (commencing with Year C).

In the form in which the General Synod has approved it, the *Revised*

Common Lectionary has been supplemented by the Liturgical Commission with lectionaries for a second and a third Sunday service, similarly spread over three years, but not with a daily lectionary. When a daily lectionary is produced, it will need to be either a one-year lectionary (perhaps with some degree of omission) or a three-year lectionary (no doubt with some degree of repetition): to combine a two-year daily lectionary with a three-year Sunday lectionary, as in North America, is a recipe for confusion.

The Three Lessons

The commendable provision of three lessons at Holy Communion (or at the 'Principal Service', if not Holy Communion) has to overcome a difficult practical problem. On the assumption that all three will be read, the lessons are kept short, but it is recognized that in many churches only two may be read, so the coverage of Scripture will there be materially reduced. Moreover, it is further assumed that one of the two read will always be the Gospel, but that means that either the Old Testament or the Epistle may always be omitted, thus depriving the congregation of hearing an important part of the Scriptures. The *ASB* tries to regulate this, by indicating which of the other two lessons is to be read if only one is, and choosing the Old Testament lesson at some seasons and the Epistle at others. The *Revised Common Lectionary*, however, opts simply for the first reading, ie the Old Testament. It is an interesting choice, but it means that the Epistles, in which so much of the Christian faith is explained, may be wholly omitted, and the importance of the Second and Third Sunday Service (Morning and Evening Prayer), in which there are only two lessons but the second is taken from any part of the New Testament, is proportionately increased. When the rubrics of the *Revised Common Lectionary* are reconsidered, it would seem wiser, at Holy Communion, to substitute the regulations of the *ASB*, or, perhaps better, simply to say that, as the readings are not long, all three are to be read.

The Coverage of Scripture

Since the pivotal lesson in this lectionary is evidently the Gospel, the first test of how well Scripture is covered is the coverage of the Gospels. Matthew is assigned to Year A, Mark to Year B and Luke to Year C, and in each year passages from the earlier part of the respective Gospel are appointed in a fairly orderly fashion for reading during the non-festal period, here called 'Ordinary Time', ie the Pre-Lent Sundays and the Sundays after Trinity. Of course, with the limitations of a Sunday lectionary, the coverage is not complete, and the reading, though orderly, is not consecutive. The latter part of the three Synoptic Gospels is assigned

to the Holy Week-Easter season, and the coverage there appears to be similarly adequate. Readings from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are naturally used in the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season.

There are, however, four Gospels, and John seems to be much less satisfactorily served. It is mainly used in the period from late Lent to Trinity Sunday, though chapter 6 is inserted after chapter 6 of Mark (the shortest of the Gospels) in Year B, because its setting is similarly the feeding of the five thousand; and isolated passages appear elsewhere. Much of John is in fact read, but not in the same orderly way as the other Gospels. Since the Liturgical Commission was adding lectionaries for two other Sunday services, one wonders why advantage was not taken of this to provide a full-length treatment of John at one of the other two services, comparable to the treatment of the three Synoptic Gospels at the Principal Service. Admittedly, this would not be available to a congregation which had only one Sunday service: they would have to be content with what was in the lectionary for the Principal Service. But that is no reason for depriving other congregations.

As regards the rest of the New Testament, Acts is read at the Principal Service in the Easter season, together with 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation; and in ordinary time and the pre-Advent season Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Philemon, Hebrews and James are read. At the Second and Third Sunday Services, the general practice is for books previously read to be gone through again, though a few readings are added from 1 Corinthians and 2 Peter. So, apart from a few of the shorter Epistles, all books are to some degree covered.

As far as the Old Testament is concerned, Genesis, Exodus, 1 Samuel–2 Kings, Job, Proverbs, Jeremiah, Hosea and Amos are the books read in orderly fashion at the Principal Service. At the Second and Third Sunday Services, the practice of going through the same books again is often followed, though certain books are added: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Ezra–Nehemiah, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jonah. As the Old Testament is so large, many books are neglected apart from a few odd readings: notably, Leviticus, Numbers, Judges, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Esther, Daniel and some of the Minor Prophets. The Third Sunday Service is here a wasted opportunity, since the readings appointed for the numerous Sundays after Trinity at that service, both Old Testament and New Testament, are the same in all three years.

The lectionaries for the Second and Third Sunday Services make one wonder how much thought has been given to the advantages and disadvantages of having a three-year lectionary. Since it inevitably means

that some important passages of Scripture will be heard less frequently, the only justification for it can be a fuller coverage of Scripture. No doubt the complete avoidance of repetition is impossible: there are some passages which must be heard every year. But the degree of repetition in the lectionaries for the Second and Third Sunday Services is extreme. Their general practice of going through the same books again as are gone through in the lectionary for the Principal Sunday Service (often choosing much the same passages), and the particular practice in the third lectionary of using exactly the same readings in all three years throughout the Trinity season, call into question the basic decision to choose a three-year cycle rather than a two-year one. When the *Revised Common Lectionary* comes up for reconsideration, the Liturgical Commission will need to make up its mind either to take better advantage of the three-year cycle, by covering books more fully and adding other books, or else to abandon it.

The Apocrypha

In one respect the coverage of Scripture in the *Revised Common Lectionary* is undeniably good. This is that canonical alternatives are provided for all readings from the Apocrypha, whether on Sundays or on holy days. At the same time, the number of readings from the Apocrypha is rather high. In the three Sunday services, over three years, an apocryphal reading is appointed at rather more than one service in six, and others are appointed on holy days. In the older Anglican lectionaries, readings from the Apocrypha were confined to holy days and weekdays, and this is a norm worth remembering. The use of apocryphal readings on Sundays was first authorized in 1922.

Unfashionable Teaching

Since Sunday lectionaries are selective, there is always the danger of the prejudices of the editors resulting in censorship. This tendency needs to be firmly resisted, for one of the chief aims of even a selective lectionary should be to present the whole counsel of God. Readings about judgment, and especially about hell, have been frequent casualties, none the less. Here the *Revised Common Lectionary* seems less open to criticism than the *ASB* lectionary. The *Revised Common Lectionary* shows likewise no tendency to omit condemnations of fornication, adultery or divorce. This is much to its credit.

There are two subjects, however, of which the *Revised Common Lectionary* does seem remarkably shy. In the Epistles, there are seven passages affirming male headship (1 Cor 11:2-16; 1 Cor 14:33-36; Eph

5:21-24, 33; Col 3:18; 1 Tim 2:8-15; Tit 2:5; 1 Pet 3:5-7). Only Titus 2:5 is included in the *Revised Common Lectionary* (at the Second Sunday Service, Year B, on Epiphany 3). The Epistles also contain five passages condemning homosexual vice (Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 1:10; 2 Pet 2:7; Jude 7). None of these is included in the *Revised Common Lectionary*. At the Third Sunday Service, Year B, on Epiphany 2, there is a reading beginning at 1 Corinthians 6:11, 'And such were some of you...', but it modestly fails to tell us what in fact the Corinthian Christians previously were!

Editions

The references for the readings at all three services in all three years are listed in the Liturgical Commission's *Report on the Calendar, Lectionary and Collects, 2000* (GS 1161, 1995), since reissued. The readings for the Principal Service have been printed out as a book, according to two versions, the NRSV and the New International Version, published by Mowbray and Hodder & Stoughton respectively. Nothing similar has been done, to the writer's knowledge, with the readings for the two other Sunday services. Since these seem to be the least well considered parts of the new provision, it is perhaps wise to be cautious before spending more money and giving them greater permanence.

ROGER BECKWITH is Warden emeritus of Latimer House.