

HOW DOES THE LECTIONARY WORK? (PART 1)

A short while ago I had the chance to be a part of 2 faith-sharing groups on the same day, engaging in the fellowship of food and the upcoming Sunday's Scripture readings. Among the things that intrigued me was the way in which the same or similar difficulties and questions surfaced in both these groups. One specific question asked was, "Who chooses these readings, and how are they put together in what we hear at Mass?" It's a wonderful question that deserves an answer: I believe that if we understand the principles that underlie the Lectionary we will be able to hear God's Word more fruitfully and be more well-nourished by it. This essay will try to describe how the Sunday readings; I will address weekday and saints day readings in Part 2.

On Sundays of "Ordinary Time," our Lectionary comes in 3 different volumes, called A, B & C. The Gospel selections are, as much as possible, a "continuous" reading of Matthew (for Cycle A), Mark (for Cycle B), and Luke (for Cycle C). Just FYI, we are in Cycle B this year, the Year of Mark.

These 3 "Synoptic" Gospels are divided up to cover the 34 Sundays of the "Ordinary Time" Church year. Since Mark is much shorter than Matthew or Luke, we will get 5 Sundays' worth of John 6 (the Bread of Life discourse) a little later on in the summer, to make up the difference.

Once a Gospel selection has been made, the people who assembled the Lectionary went into the Old Testament to try to find a reading that would parallel a primary theological point or detail of storyline. So the 1st Reading and the Gospel are deliberately chosen to work together.

Beyond that, the Responsorial Psalm is chosen to reflect the 1st Reading in some specific way. So we can see that all of these should have some way of being related or connected.

This leaves the 2nd Reading, which typically has nothing to do with any of this! It is taken from the writings of the New Testament (usually the letters of St. Paul), and selections are made in what is called "lectio semi-continua" form: we will stay with a given book for weeks, and our excerpts will be more or less in order, but there will be significant gaps. As I write this, we are currently hearing from II Corinthians: but between one week and the next we jumped from chapter 5 to chapter 8; the following week we will go to chapter 12. The week after that we'll begin the letter to the Ephesians.

All of this is pretty well still kept intact during what are called the "privileged seasons" of the Church calendar: Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. The difference here is that many of the Gospel readings now will come from John, especially in Lent when RCIA is in its intense final phases). The 2nd Reading will be carefully chosen to fit in with the theology of the other readings (this is, again, especially true in the last weeks of Lent). In Easter the 2nd Reading is typically from the Acts of the Apostles.

If we know how the readings are supposed to relate, we can listen more carefully and gain more insight into the truths the Church wishes to present to us at Eucharist in hearing the Word.