

The Readings of Advent By Russell Hardiman

The season of Advent becomes Paul's "acceptable time", when the primary focus of the season is on the consequences of our attitudes to time, the way we consider it and the way we are conscious of celebrating it. For the purposes of this article we shall consider the theology of the Liturgical Year, with particular emphasis on the relationship of the key periods of Advent, Christmas and the Epiphany. Then we shall illustrate the main goals of Vatican II in the proposal for a cycle of readings over several years and how the major principles are illustrated in the Advent-Christmas readings and how, on an ecumenical level, the major churches share the same readings.

Proclaiming the Word in Advent/Christmastide

Since earliest generations Christians have given witness to the continuing tradition, inherited from their Jewish heritage, and publicly acknowledged by Jesus in the synagogue at Caphernaum when he proclaimed the Isaiah passage as being fulfilled in their hearing even as they listened (Luke 4:21). Paul himself encouraged his co-workers in the task of proclaiming the Gospel to pay particular attention to the public reading of scriptures: "... devote yourself to the reading of scripture, to preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 4:13). Vatican II proclaimed "the primary duty of priests is the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all". Proclamation covers a range of activities of the church from personal witness, to sacramental witness, to sacramental ministry, to pastoral care but especially a priority in concern for preaching the Word of God. Advent is a prime occasion to preach of the fulfilment of God's plan as people listen to the Word. In our generation, the USA Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy published a major document encouraging the ministry of preaching and entitled it "Fulfilled in Your Hearing". Published in 1982 it grew out of a concern for the quality of preaching in the Church and, in so far as that concern is still a priority in the church today, it deserves to be better known and it can still serve as a model for preaching during Advent and Christmastide. This document defines the homily as: ... a scriptural interpretation of human existence which enables a community to recognise God's active presence, to respond to that presence in faith through liturgical word and gesture, and beyond the liturgical word and gesture, and beyond the liturgical assembly through a life lived in conformity with the Gospel. 5 This is the vision expressed in the Post Communion Prayer of the Roman Midnight Mass for Christmas, when the commitment beyond the assembly itself is phrased "may we share his life completely by living as he has taught". Vatican II credited the liturgical year with an almost sacramental title when it stated: "recalling the mysteries of redemption, she opens to the faithful the riches of the Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way present for all time". 6 The Council Fathers also stated that the liturgical year sets forth "the whole mystery of Christ from the incarnation and nativity to the ascension, to Pentecost, and the expectation of the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord". 7 It is important that we emphasise in our celebration the whole mystery of Christ, not a pageant or crib tableau, nor a passion play, nor a historical celebration, much less just an opportunity for nostalgia trip down the memory lane of childhood. The focus is on the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the total incarnated life of Jesus as human, from womb to tomb, to Resurrection and ascension to glory from where he has sent the Holy Spirit upon the Church to raise us up with him. Whenever texts and Prayers such as Prefaces, Eucharistic Prayers, Orations and Blessing summarise the Paschal Mystery they always mention the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, almost as if it is a code phrase to summarise his whole life. We avoid anything which does not give the full emphasis in incarnational theology to the mystery of Jesus' total life, and not portray Christmas as if it is all about a baby. Paul teaches us in the Midnight Mass reading that the Christ of Christmas is the Christ of Easter "who sacrificed himself to set us free from all wickedness and to purify his people (Titus 2, 11-14: Midnight Proper 1). This sense that the scripture is used to interpret life is the motive behind the actual selections used for both the Advent and Christmastide readings. Beyond the understanding of the context of a particular text and beyond any attempts at an exposition of that text, the reader and homilist must interpret life itself by illuminating what God does in the depth of human existence. Several reading from Paul in the Advent selections (Advent 1A, Advent 2A, Advent 4A and B) give

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interpretations of the scriptural method of interpreting human existence to see the hand of God in the events of daily life. When we read the scriptures, we do not read it as an historical text from the past but as the divine revelation for the present age while we look forward to its promised fulfilment. The Opening Prayer for the Vigil Mass for Christmas expresses this well, even if it is a shame that most people never hear it: God our Father every year we rejoice as we look forward to this feast of our salvation. Pastoral Liturgy Vol 51,1 | November 2020 – February 2021 | Page 7 May we welcome Christ as our Redeemer, and meet him with confidence when he comes to be our judge, who lives and reigns... 8

Liturgical Year

Arising from the specific Judaeo Christian concept of celebration, the linkage of past, present and future events are seen as facets of the one continuous presence of God and God's word. Consistent with the Hebrew word DaBaR, we celebrate God's presence, an active and ongoing presence of the almighty not just a sequence of isolated events in past history. This perspective raises questions as to how the liturgical year is different from a Calendar of Feasts. A calendar of events would give a perspective of separate, discreet, unconnected events, but the liturgical year is deeper. The liturgical year is the Year of Grace, as Pius Parsch's9 famous five-volume study was entitled before Vatican II. God's presence, God's revelation and salvation are eternal, so that when we read of events in the past, or pray for fulfilment for ourselves now, or when we look forward in expectation to the coming glory, these three planes are really one. The three dimensions interact and interweave but our consciousness is of the NOW, how God is revealed to us this day.

Past Present Future

The nuances of the classic Judaeo Christian sense of celebration are well illustrated both in the pattern of prayer in the Eucharistic Prayers as well as in the flow of themes specifying Christ's coming celebrated in Advent. The chronological flow is obviously past, present and future. However, in Advent the trend is the opposite in starting with remembering the future, in the sense of the focus on the full completion of God's mystery and plan in the Second Coming of the Messiah. There are frequent mentions of the return of the Son of Man in the Gospels – and we hear many of them in the Lectionary selections at this time, both in the last weeks as well as in Christ the King Sunday and the First Sunday of Advent. The opening prayer of the First Sunday of Advent calls us to take Christ's coming seriously, that Christ may find an eager welcome at His coming and call us to His side in the Kingdom. With the various commemorations for the end of the Second World War in 1995, especially the occasionally magnificent "Australia Remembers" programmes, we have seen highlighted the differences in the understanding of celebration. The secular model of this kind of anniversary focuses on the past to remind the present generation that they too inherit the fruits of the sacrifice of others. The element of future is only vaguely shadowed. In contrast the theological sense of celebration presumes that past, present and future are all on the same plane in the one plan of God.

Vigilance in Waiting

The Advent Season's focus is on a key element of the spirituality of the Liturgical Year which flows from the theological perspective of the mystery of Christ celebrated in salvation history with its promise of fulfilment and the hope of eternal life. In Advent, the characteristic quality becomes one of vigilance and wakefulness to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. In his public ministry Jesus is recorded in the Gospels as saying frequently that the Son of Man will return. However vague this may, be it became prominent in the early Christian community. In the early Church "Come, Lord Jesus" (Maranatha in Aramaic) was the community's prayer, so it is no surprise that several Advent readings are from passages in the Epistles that are dominated by the theme of the imminent return of Jesus: 1 Thessalonians (Advent 1A and 3B), 2 Peter (Advent 2B), James (Advent 3A), Philippians (Advent 2C and 3C). The Epistles are mostly chronologically older than the Gospels but

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the preoccupation with the second coming is also very much a part of the Gospels. The Memorial Acclamations at the heart of the eucharistic Prayer all express the same threefold sense of Christ's coming: past, present and future. The text of Acclamation I: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again is formulated differently in Acclamation III by paraphrasing Paul's words in 1 Corinthians: When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death Lord Jesus until you come in glory. This same tension between past, present and future which is the characteristic of Christian vigilance shows through in the missioning rites on the First Sunday of Advent. The Post Communion Prayer invites us to see how our Communion teaches us to love heaven and that the promise and hope of heaven guide our way here on earth. The Solemn Blessing that day is even more specific in linking the triple dimensions of Christ's Coming. It would be a useful reinforcement to use this Solemn Blessing on all Advent days, not just on the First Sunday. On the First Sunday the distinctive theme is set by the Gospel reading; the Lord's Coming at the end of time. In Year A the words of Jesus are stark. Four times his call to Stay awake, therefore (Matthew 24:42, 44) is expressed. In Year B we hear Mark's version of the invitation to Be constant on the watch; be on guard (Mark 13:33-37). In Year C, Luke's message is Be on your watch, pray constantly (Luke 21:36).

Contemporary Preoccupations

Advent serves as the micro example of the macro issue because the distractions of the secular- commercial style of Christmas make it extremely difficult to celebrate Advent in its true spirit. We shudder at the trends of commercialism bringing Christmas themes into advertising from October onwards and swallowing up the Christmas and New Year festive season with the post-Christmas sales campaigns. Meanwhile the traffic blitz against the holiday road toll and drink driving continues relentlessly as if there is only one news item in this holiday season. John the Baptist was counter cultural in his challenge to stand up and be counted in producing the appropriate fruits (Advent 2A). Twice in the Advent season John holds centre stage in the call to prepare for Christ's Coming, on the Second Sunday the focus is on his Pastoral Liturgy Vol 51,1 | November 2020 – February 2021 | Page 8 preaching and on the Third Sunday the focus is on this Ministry. As Jesus looked for fruit that will last, the old joke that "what Jesus looks for is spiritual fruits not religious nuts" calls us to be positive in Christian witness and not merely negative in any carping criticism of the secular trends when trying to emphasise the profound Christian spirit of the Advent season. There is a difference between preaching **on** the scriptures and to preaching **from** the scriptures and this season is a definite challenge to be conscious of relating the scripture to the present. The art of the homily is to show the bridge that links the reflection of God's actions in the past to seeing God's presence in the events and happenings of our world.

General Principles of the Lectionary

As far back as 1963 the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy urged a deepening of awareness of the scriptures: The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's Word. In this way a more representative portion of Holy Scripture will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years.¹¹ This single paragraph of Vatican II has had the greatest ecumenical impact over the past thirty years or so to the extent that a generation of Christians have been sharing a common heritage in proclaiming and preaching the Word of God. The 1969 Roman Lectionary¹² was adopted by the Episcopal Church in USA in 1970 and the Presbyterian Church the same year. The Lutherans initially stuck with their one-year lectionary cycle but in 1974 they published a three year lectionary. The growing acceptance of the Roman Lectionary's principles and format culminated in the production in 1982 of the Common Lectionary. Nearly a decade of worship use and continued consultation resulted in the Revised Common Lectionary being published in 1992. The Uniting Church in Australia's book *Uniting in Worship* (1988) and the revised version of *An Australian Prayer Book* (1995) of the Anglican Church

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both use the Revised Common Lectionary as their cycle of readings. This ecumenical acceptance was called by Raymond Brown "Catholicism's greatest gift to Protestantism".¹³

General Themes of Advent Scripture Readings

Because the Gospels dominate in setting the theme or thrust of each set of readings the "spin" of each Sunday is determined by the Gospel. The General Introduction in the 1981 second edition of the Roman Lectionary describes each Sunday as having a distinctive theme. 1 Advent: The Lord's Coming at the end of time 2 Advent: The preaching of John the Baptist 3 Advent: The Ministry of John the Baptist 4 Advent: The events that prepared for the Lord's birth, the Annunciation and Visitation The Old Testament readings take on a special colouring in Advent. They are prophecies about the promised Messiah and the characteristics that would indicate the Messianic Age. They seem free standing witnesses though they are chosen in a typological relationship with Gospel partners to show the continuity of God's promise in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Often the focus is on Jerusalem as the continuing symbol of God's promise. What is proclaimed of Jerusalem is often code for what is God's plan. In the Hebrew scriptures this was especially true in the image of being led back from exile to rebuild Jerusalem, but in the Christian scriptures their reflection after the destruction of the city and temple leads to transferring the focus on Zion to a focus on the Church. Of the twelve Old Testament readings seven of the Advent readings are from Isaiah and in Year C other prophets are selected: Jeremiah, Baruch (Malachi), Zephaniah and Micah. The final selection is from the book of 2 Samuel (Advent 4B) about the promise to David. The Psalm selections, as always, are chosen as a reflection on the intent of the first reading and to encourage the communitarian sense of God's presence with us. About six of the Psalms are Songs of Ascent which were sung going up to Jerusalem for worship at the temple. The choice of Psalms is identical in the Roman Lectionary and the Revised Common Lectionary with the Magnificat text (Luke 1: 46-55) used as the Psalm on five occasions. The New Testament readings "from an apostle serve as exhortation and as proclamations, in keeping with the different themes of Advent". St Paul points out in Romans 15:4-9 (Advent 2A) that the scriptures give examples of hope shown by those who trusted in God: Everything that was written long ago in the scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope from the examples scripture gives of how people who did not give up hope were helped by God (Romans 15:40). Similar passages from Romans are used on four occasions and once from 1 Corinthians, with one from Hebrews. Beyond the reading of Jewish history Paul also invites us to remember the future and consequently we have readings that are dominated by the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus: twice from 1 Thessalonians (Advent 1A and 3B) and twice from Philipians (Advent 2C and 3C). The same eschatological tension is found in the reading from 2 Peter (Advent 2B) and a single passage from James (Advent 3A). James' call for patience until the Lord's Coming is illustrated by the farmer's patience in waiting for harvest, an image very appropriate in our Southern Hemisphere where Advent falls at the start of summer just as the harvest is beginning.

Principle of the Two Lectionaries

The principal difference in the two Lectionaries is the approach to the Hebrew Scripture, treating them holistically rather than treating them in a typological sense for a specific Gospel passage. This respect for the Hebrew Scriptures is taken to a logical conclusion in the Revised Common Lectionary by having Pastoral Liturgy Vol 51,1 | November 2020 – February 2021 | Page 9 continuous readings from the Old Testament in the Sundays of Ordinary Time (after Epiphany and after Pentecost) where the Roman Lectionary has continuous readings from Epistles of Paul and other Epistles. The remarkable consensus as to selections in the Roman Lectionary and the Revised Common Lectionary show how the readings confirm the general principles enunciated by Vatican II. Where there are differences they reflect the approach to citing the Hebrew Scriptures where RCL treats the text more holistically. This usually means that the RCL segments are simple excerpts rather than a series of selected verses, which illustrates the practice of reading from the Bible rather than from

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an edited lectionary. With selections from the Old Testament the RCL provide an alternative reading when the Roman reading is from a Deuterocanonical book, for example Advent 2C when Baruch is given as an alternative to Malachi. The major feature of the structure of the Lectionaries is illustrated by how a particular Gospel is assigned to specific cycles. The cycles are read in order beginning with Matthew, followed by Mark, then Luke with John not having a specific cycle but being prominent in Lent and Easter of all cycles. The crunch comes in knowing which cycle is celebrated in which calendar year. The generic rule is that any year that is divisible by three uses cycle C. Thus, calendar year 1998 is divisible by three so we read cycle C. Then we begin again the sequence with Matthew in Year A 1999 and so to the Year of Mark in the jubilee year 2000. As always, the Gospel determines the major thrust of the set of readings with the Old Testament passage chosen to relate to the Gospel, and the Psalm chosen to extend or deepen the insight of the first reading. The New Testament readings, being reflections of the shared life of the early Christian community, serve as a commentary for the connection of faith and life appropriate for today's community. The sets of readings for Advent and Christmastide exemplify the principle of the choice of readings for the major seasons or feasts. The principle of thematic reading (*Lectio Selecta*) means that passages are selected from individual books of the Bible to link up with the particular feast and all three readings, with the psalm, are unified around that feast. On the other hand, the principle of continuous readings (*Lectio Continua*) in Ordinary Time incorporates readings from the Gospel of the cycle linked with the Old Testament reading while the second reading is semi-continuous from the letters of St. Paul, with the result that the readings are not designed with a single focus but are in fact parallel tracks leading towards the mystery of God's presence. In the key seasons, the Sundays are never displaced for another feast, but it can happen in Ordinary Time. The threefold distinction of feasts (Solemnities, Feast, Memorials) allows for the Solemnities of Our Lord in the cycle of feasts to displace Sundays of Ordinary Time. Thus, early in the year, a Sunday of Ordinary Time can give way to the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple. The RCL readings, where they are different from the Roman readings, are generally longer and hence more likely to situate a passage in its proper context. In churches where reading from the Bible is the norm, rather than from a printed Lectionary with the edited selections, the longer passages perhaps help to provide a fuller framework for the significant verses. It is imperative that the homilist and the reader look up the context of the passages otherwise pericopes may be left to stand alone.

Living Advent

Just as we can preach on the scriptures rather than preach from the scriptures, it is possible to preach about Advent rather than to live it. It certainly does help to have a sense of the over arching plan of the season and its specific topics. These include the unified vision of God's plan in salvation history, reflected in the concern for Jerusalem in the past and now focused on the role of the Church in the present. The qualities of the Messianic age as outlined by the prophets need to be reinterpreted as the signs of the times in our day so that, like John the Baptist, we are called to be witnesses to speak for the light. We take heart from John's assurance that the messiah will come to baptise with the Holy Spirit and with Fire. The Hebrew concern for identity, ancestors, bonding and heritage show through in the pattern of genealogies. The purpose of those passages is to relate the connectedness of Jesus to the promise of the Lord. Nowadays the individualism that is so rampant is an obstacle to an acceptable sense of belonging to a group where the benefits accrue for the individual and to the community of which they are a part. The Advent Christmas season is an antidote for this modern malaise. The challenge is to keep the Christmas spirit, and its community focus, alive throughout the year.

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Endnotes

- 2 Russell Hardiman, "The Readings of Advent," in *The Years of the Year: The Paschal Mystery Celebrated in Christian Worship*, ed. Russell Hardiman (Fremantle: Pastoral Liturgy Publications, 1997). This article has been edited where necessary. This book is no longer in print but can be sourced second hand. Used with permission.
- 3 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Life and Ministry of Priests," (1995). http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_24101995_prh_en.html.
- 4 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington: USCCB Publishing, 1982).
- 5 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, para. 29.
- 6 Second Vatican Council, "Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963), para. 102.
- 7 Second Vatican Council, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," para. 102.
- 8 This Opening Prayer predates the current translation of the Roman Missal.
- 9 Pius Parsch. *The Church's Year of Grace* (Liturgical Press, 1953).
- 10 This memorial acclamation is not used in the current translation of the Roman Missal.
- 11 Second Vatican Council, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," para. 51.
- 12 Congregation for Divine Worship, "Ordo Lectionum Missae: editio typica altera," (1969). http://archive.cwatershed.org/media/pdfs/14/05/05/11-44-20_0.pdf.
- 13 Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, "General Introduction to the Lectionary ", 2nd Edition (1981): para. 93. [https:// www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/general-introduction-to-thelectionary-second-edition-2189](https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/general-introduction-to-thelectionary-second-edition-2189).
- 14 Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, "General Introduction to the Lectionary."
- 15 Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, "General Introduction to the Lectionary," para. 93
- 16 second Vatican Council, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," para.51