

CHRISTMAS AND BEYOND 2017: Mark and the Lectionary

At the beginning of the Lectionary for Sundays there is a series of tables that list the Gospel readings through Ordinary Time and mark out the shape of the Gospel and its themes. The Gospel readings are 'semi-continuous', that is they follow the Gospel chapter by chapter but they also miss sections out as well (hence the 'semi'). One of the challenges of proclaiming and hearing the Gospel on Sunday is that we can have little sense of that continuity:

- Does what comes before or after matter?
- How does this reading follow on from last week or lead on to next week?
- Are we aware of what is missing?

There are three Lectionary Cycles, each focussed on a synoptic Gospel: A – Matthew, B – Mark, C – Luke. The purpose of the Lectionary on the Sundays of Ordinary Time is to present the Lord's life and teaching within the context of the wider theme of the Paschal Mystery. Each year starts with the beginning of Jesus' preaching which follows on from the Baptism of the Lord. Each year ends with eschatological themes which lead into Advent of the following year. Though the overall pattern is similar each Gospel has its own character: the heritage of Matthew, the immediacy of Mark and the compassion of Luke.

- How do we help people recognise and appreciate the differences characteristics of the Gospels?

Among us, yet unknown

Though the liturgical year begins in Advent we do not start at the beginning of the Gospel (in a similar way the end of the liturgical year does not coincide with the end of the Gospel). The initial verses of Mark's Gospel are heard on the 2nd Sunday of Advent and this sets out Marks central theme — Jesus, the Son of God is a mystery which is slowly revealed through his account (to hear the initial verses of Matthew you have to wait until Christmas Eve, and for Luke the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time).

In fact, only two of the Sundays are taken from Mark's Gospel but this theme of Jesus as a mystery to be revealed threads through the weeks giving Year B a distinct take on the pattern of Advent Sundays. On the first Sunday we do not know when the Master will return. On the second Sunday John the Baptist tantalises us with the message that 'someone' is coming. On the third Sunday Jesus has still not been revealed yet he may be standing among us, unknown to us. On the fourth Sunday, in Luke's account of the Annunciation, we are promised a child who will be holy and will be called Son of God. It is only with the Nativity of the Lord that this promise is fulfilled at a time we did not expect, the 'someone' is a child in a manger among us yet unknown to us.

We tend to think of Advent and Christmas as connected but separate seasons. The Introduction to the Liturgical Year however suggests considering them as one season. If we have sought to make connections across the Sundays of Advent how do we carry those connections through to the Christmas season? Who is the Christ that is revealed to us on the Nativity of the Lord, the Holy Family, the Epiphany?

The shape of Ordinary Time

For Ordinary Time the table at the beginning of the Lectionary gives a structure to the Sunday that mirrors the structure of Mark's Gospel. After a prelude it effectively divides the Gospel and the Sundays in two with 'The Mystery progressively revealed' (3–23) and 'The Mystery of the Son of Man' (24–34).

These parts are broken up into stages:

The figure of Jesus the Messiah (1–2)

The Mystery progressively revealed

- Jesus with Jewish crowds (3–9)
- Jesus with his disciples (10–14)
- Jesus manifests himself (15–23)

The Mystery of the Son of Man

- The 'Way' of the Son of Man (24–30)
- Final revelation in Jerusalem (31–33)
- The fulfilment of the mystery (34)

These stages can be helpful not only to those who proclaim and preach but also to those who prepare the liturgy and choose suitable music. They can be seen as mini-seasons.

The beginning

The Sundays before Lent in Year B are a continuous telling of Mark Chapter 1:

- 3rd Sunday Mark 1:14–20
- 4th Sunday Mark 1:21–28
- 5th Sunday Mark 1:29–39
- 6th Sunday Mark 1:40–45

It is worth as part of preparation reading the whole of chapter 1. It is short but 'action-packed'. Jesus, with his disciples, is moving around the Galilee region and healing and teaching. His reputation is growing fast because he is seen to teach with authority. This is not just a comment about his authenticity but that he speaks and things happen — the unclean spirits obey him. By considering the Sundays as a group with all the seeming repetitions, it is possible to highlight the small differences. Some may baulk on the 5th Sunday that when Peter's mother-in-law is cured she immediately waits on them but for Mark the response to an encounter with Jesus is to be transformed and live a life of service (diakonia). In a similar way on the 6th Sunday the cleansed leper's response is to begin to evangelise.

The beginning of the end

The turning point in the Gospel and in the Sunday lectionary is Mark 8:27–35: Peter's confession of faith and the first prophecy of the Passion that is heard on 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

- What are the ways that these who hear this Gospel proclaimed might appreciate this change?

Missing links

This Gospel also illustrates what the Lectionary tables do not show— what is missing. The following Sunday (25th) the Gospel begins with Mark 9:30. Thirty-three verses are omitted in this ‘semi-continuous’ reading. They fall into three sections that illustrate the different reasons why verses can be omitted.

- Mark 8:36–9:1 is about the conditions of following Jesus — this is similar to Matthew 16: 24–27 which is heard on 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A.
- Mark 9: 2–10 is Mark’s account of the Transfiguration which is heard on the 2nd Sunday of Lent, Year B
- Mark 9: 11–29 is a conversation about Elijah (11–13) followed by the healing of the epileptic demoniac (13–29). Though the first passage is also found in Matthew and the healing story in both Matthew and Luke neither is heard on a Sunday.

So omissions can either be to avoid repetition with another synoptic gospel, the passage occurs elsewhere in the liturgical year or it is omitted. The connection between the first prophecy of the Passion and the Transfiguration can be lost unless those who proclaim, preach and prepare check the context of the Gospel reading. Looking at Mark’s Gospel overall and the Sunday Lectionary where there are omissions they are often of healing stories whether this due to a feeling that not every example is needed or they reflect a hesitancy of the editors cannot be known.

Mark and John

The other element in each of the 3 Lectionary Cycles, which is most pronounced in Year B, is the place of the Gospel of John. The American liturgist, Gail Ramshaw, has suggested that we should think of the three cycles as the Year of Matthew and John, Mark and John, Luke and John to remind ourselves that John’s Gospel is neither forgotten nor an added extra but integral to each cycle. It is John who is heard in the Christmas Season, on many of the Sundays of Lent and throughout the Easter Season. And in Year B we hear John, chapter 6, over the 17th-21st Sundays.

These Sundays with Jesus’ teaching on the Eucharist are perhaps the clearest example of how a series of Sundays can be connected. They come as a contrast, possibly even a shock after weeks of Mark’s Gospel. Without even knowing we become attuned to Mark’s brevity and starkness and then we move to John with a much slower pace and richness of language. The editors of the Lectionary do try to make the transition smooth by a sleight of hand. On the 16th Sunday we listen to Mark 6:30–34 where Jesus has compassion for the crowds, it even ends ‘he set himself to teach them at some length’. If we continue with Mark’s Gospel we discover, typically, that he does not actually tell us what Jesus taught but that the story moves on to the feeding of the five thousand. The Lectionary editors therefore almost treat that phrase at 6:34 ironically as Jesus is going to teach at some length in words of John, Chapter 6. And this chapter begins with the feeding of the five thousand crossing paths with Mark’s account.

Topping and Tailing

In Year B John appears twice more in Ordinary Time – at the beginning and the end. On the 2nd Sunday (John 1:35–42) John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God and Andrew and Simon Peter respond to Jesus’ call to follow him. On the 3rd Sunday (Mark 1:14–20) Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God and calls Andrew, Simon Peter, James and John. It may seem odd that we hear elements of the same story twice — the unwary

listener may think that Andrew had to be called twice! If John's account was not heard on a Sunday there would obviously be a loss. The editors of the Lectionary are making a quasi-narrative by inserting the passage here as it explicitly follows on from the Baptism of the Lord (usually the previous Sunday). More than that it is a reminder that Jesus is the Messiah and so uses John's Gospel to reiterate the paradox of Mark's Gospel. From the beginning of Mark we are told that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, but whole narrative is about this mystery being slowly revealed. These two Sundays (2nd and 3rd) therefore lay down the themes of Mark's Gospel — Jesus, the Son of God who proclaims the kingdom and invites us to repentance.

In a similar way the liturgical year ends on Christ the King with Jesus revealing himself to Pilate (John 18:33-37) as the king whose kingdom is not of this world but came into the world to bear witness to the truth. In some we could see this as another sleight hand by the editors of Lectionary. Many scholars see Mark's Gospel as the slow revelation of the Messianic Secret, that Jesus is the Son of God, which reaches its climax at the death of Jesus and the recognition by the centurion that this was the Son of God (15:39). On 'Christ the King' this is no longer someone who is among us yet unknown. Jesus is brought before the Roman Governor, the highest state official, and questioned. It is the kingdom which is among yet unseen and perhaps Mark and John share a desire that we will see with the eyes of faith.

Table of Plenty

Though the current Lectionary is almost 50 years old many people who listen to it faithfully Sunday by Sunday are unaware of its structure. Through preaching and other means, ways can be found to help people appreciate the unfolding pattern of the word not so that they admire the Lectionary but so that they can engage in the Good News that Mark is offering.

For additional resources in support of Catholic Bible Sunday please see:
www.catholicbiblesunday.org