

## Our Sunday Bible readings

Sometimes pastors get asked questions like these:

- where do the list of Bible readings we use each Sunday come from?
- do the pastors choose which portions of Scripture are read from week to week?
- what is the logic to the way our schedule of readings is arranged?

In this article I'd like to answer these questions, and as I do, offer some encouragement as we together listen to God speak to us in his Word Sunday by Sunday.

First, we need to go back a step and consider why we have Bible readings in worship at all. On several occasions Jesus tells us we are to 'abide in his Word' (John 8:31; 15:7,8), that is, to 'make our home' in his Word. As Christians we can do this in many ways. But one of the fundamental ways is reading the Bible aloud as we gather for worship. This is not an optional activity for Christians, but is central to who we are as a congregation. St Paul counsels the young pastor Timothy, 'devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture' (1 Timothy 4:13). For an excellent, short, animated video on this, search online '*Bible project public reading of scripture*'.

However, when we come to do this practically, some questions will arise. For example, which parts of the Word should we 'abide in' and in what order? Where should we start? How much Scripture should we publicly read each time we gather? How often should we return to parts we've already read? Although we have the *general* instruction from Jesus and St Paul, we have no specific command as to how we are to organise our 'abiding in the Word' and our 'public reading of Scripture'. As such, there has been diversity throughout Christian history as to how the Church has carried this out.

From fairly early on the Church began to develop 'lectionaries' as one way of organising this. A lectionary is simply a list of Scripture readings appointed to be read on particular days. This is a custom most likely inherited from the Jewish people, as there is evidence of lists of appointed readings in the Synagogues. It may well be that Jesus himself is taking part in this as recorded in Luke 4:14-21 when he reads from the scroll of Isaiah.

There is a long and complex story as to how we ended up with the lectionary we use today. For a long time, the Church followed what is sometimes called the 'one-year lectionary' or the 'historic lectionary'. Luther's sermons and Bach's cantatas were all composed in line with this one-year cycle of readings, and you'll find various references to it in our older hymnals. But in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a significant movement to revise this, one of the major reasons being a desire to cover a wider sweep of Scripture. This revision happened and so today our congregation, together with the majority of Christian Churches in the world who follow a lectionary, use the 'Revised Common Lectionary' (RCL). This is a list of readings which works on a three-year cycle, and each Sunday gives an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, an Epistle reading (from Acts – Revelation), and a Gospel reading.

So, in answer to one of the questions above, the pastors generally don't choose the readings for the year ahead or the coming Sunday. They may do this from time to time for particular reasons, but generally we follow the lectionary. One of the good things about this is that it is the product of a wider wisdom in the Church, and prevents any one pastor from continually getting on his hobby-horse, and so for example having 52 readings a year from the book of Revelation!

But what about the logic in having several readings from different sections of Scripture each Sunday? As many of you know, some Christian Churches don't use a lectionary and instead emphasise the continual reading and preaching of whole books of the Bible. This is certainly another valid way for a congregation to 'abide in the Word' and there is much wisdom in it. However, there is also great significance in the way the lectionary readings are arranged each Sunday.

The basic principle here is that our reading of Scripture is not only about learning God's will generally, but is ultimately to bring Christ to us. Remember Jesus himself said that the whole of the Scripture testifies to Him (John 5:39). This is why the list of readings for each Sunday always culminates in the Gospel where we hear the words and deeds of Jesus. The other readings then generally either *point* to Christ (OT), pray together *with* Christ (Psalm), or further *explain* Christ's significance (Epistle). It's also this principle that lead to the custom of pastors preaching more often on the Gospel reading.

Another important principle in how the lectionary readings are arranged is the belief that 'Scripture interprets Scripture'. Often the readings for a given Sunday have inter-connected themes and points. So, for example, as I write the Gospel reading for this Sunday has Jesus saying, '*Repent and believe in the good news*' (Mark 1:15). Then the Old Testament reading for the day is Jonah's prophetic message to the people of Nineveh, and their subsequent *repentance*. If we hear a word we don't understand in the Bible like 'repent', the first place we learn more about this is from other passages of the Bible, such as the story of Jonah and the Ninevites.

Another very practically helpful thing about having a lectionary is that worshippers can know what readings are coming up, and can read and study them beforehand. This is something I'd encourage you to do. Many people testify to the fact that they 'get so much more' out of the readings and sermon on Sunday when they've read them through before on Saturday night or Sunday morning. The full list of lectionary readings are on the LCA website and elsewhere on the internet, and the upcoming readings are always listed in our bulletin.

I hope this article has helped you learn a little more about our Sunday Bible readings, so that you can be encouraged as we together '*devote ourselves to the public reading of Scripture*'.

Jesus says, '*If you abide in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*'.

Yours in Christ, Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer