

Reading the Scriptures decently – and in order by Charles Sherlock

*Let us reverently hear and read holy scripture, which is the food of the soul.
Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the Old and New
Testaments ...*

*Let us ruminiate, and, as it were, chew the cud, that we may have the sweet
juice, having spiritual effect, marrow, honey, kernel, taste, comfort and
consolation of them.*

Thomas Cranmer, *Homily on Scripture*

Setting the scene

Some years back I was at a ‘middling high’ Anglican Eucharist at which the Gospel was read, the congregation standing, followed by the epistle and the sermon (for both of which the congregation sat). The sequence felt quite odd. On another occasion one reading was followed by a psalm, then the creed, prayers and communion; the Gospel was read after the post-communion hymn, followed by the sermon (people from the next service entered during the hymn). To a traditional ‘prayer book’ Anglican of evangelical conviction, for whom the public reading and hearing of holy scripture remains focal in public worship, this was all rather disconcerting!

Then I began to hear of similar practices in other congregations, especially in less ‘formal’ services, as well as occasional strident insistence that the congregation remain seated for the Gospel reading in the Holy Communion service. At first I suspended judgement: churches in western cultures are in a time of flux, if not crisis: worrying about when, how and in what order we read the scriptures seems to matter little in a mission context in which ‘fresh expressions’ of church are being sought.

On further reflection, wider and deeper issues began to emerge. The pattern by which a church regularly reads the holy scriptures says a good deal about its view of their status and nature. It is one thing to accept that ‘all scripture is inspired by God and useful for instruction’ (2 Timothy 3.16), another to demonstrate this in the choice and arrangement of readings. It is clearly impossible to read everything, and different patterns are appropriate for Sundays and weekdays, not least because of length: including two chapters each Sunday would take two decades, though both Testaments can be comfortably read on a daily basis over two years.¹

When it comes to what is read in regular Sunday services, factors such as time-pressure, embarrassment about the readings’ content, or shifts from oral to more (usually electronic) visual cultures, can mean that readings are cut short, ‘filleted’, or reduced to the few verses on which the sermon is based. Even where a better diet is given, the traditional order of First / Old before New Testament, and the Gospel reading coming as the climax in the Eucharist, is being disregarded. To what extent do these issues matter?

Anglican practice: mere custom or expression of principle?

Readings from the holy scriptures have been central to every act of corporate Christian worship from the earliest days. As a Jew, Jesus heard the scriptures read in the synagogue, and interpreted them to both the people in general (eg

¹ I became more deeply aware of the practical issues involved as the member of the Liturgy Commission of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia who carries the lectionary portfolio, and is thus closely involved in the production of the annual Lectionary booklet which brings together the tables for Sunday and Feast-days, Daily Morning & Evening Prayer, Daily Psalms, and Daily Eucharist readings. Discussion on the Commission about the principles undergirding the selection of readings – ie moving from doctrinal ‘theory’ about the scriptures to principles undergirding their actual use (noting that 2 Timothy 3.14ff contains both elements) made me realise how little the latter were generally understood or reflected upon.

Luke 4.14ff), to his disciples (eg Matthew 5-7) and in hot debate with the scholars of his day (eg Mark 13.13-37). To this practice, early Christian communities added the custom of hearing the stories of God's 'good news' as taught and lived by Jesus, soon gathered into the canonical Gospels. Letters from Paul, Peter and other apostolic figures were circulated and read in other churches (cf Colossians 4.16, 2 Peter 3.15-16).

These precedents shaped the customary practice which the Church of England inherited at the Reformation: daily psalmody and brief sentences, with epistle and gospel readings at the Eucharist. Cranmer did not change the latter practice, but wholly transformed the former by proving that the whole Psalter is read systematically each month, together with a systematic annual pattern of daily readings from both Testaments as the opening section of the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* (see *Concerning the Service of the Church*, printed in the front section of the BCP 1662).² Anglicans thus became used to hearing two or more readings from the scriptures in each service. *The Book of Common Prayer* lectionary (and its successors) provides a comprehensive pattern of daily readings covering the whole of the New, most of the Old / First Testament and some of the Apocrypha every year, in addition to an Epistle and Gospel reading in the Holy Communion.

In modern Anglican prayer books (including *An Australian Prayer Book* 1978, and *A Prayer Book for Australia* 1995), Morning Prayer, Litany and Holy Communion – the standard provision in *BCP*, relaxed after 1872 – are combined into one service. Sunday and Festival readings are taken from the Old / First Testament (or Acts in Easter), the New Testament's letters, and the Gospels, together with psalmody. This pattern of readings is based on the *Revised Common Lectionary*, an ecumenical adaptation of the 'Three-Year' system introduced by Rome from 1969. On Sundays over three years (A, B and C), substantial coverage is given of the Gospels and New Testament letters, plus significant passages from Acts and Revelation, and a representative 'sampling' of the Law (Year A), Former Prophets and Writings (Year B) and Latter Prophets (Year C) of the First Testament.³

While admirable for its attention to scripture, some find this system of up to four readings for a main Sunday service to be an indigestible, overly-rich diet. How does this discipline relate to 'fresh expressions' of church? Is one reading enough? Who should choose what is read? Does the order of readings matter? And are the scriptures best 'heard' by being listened to, read along with, seen or acted out? How does preaching relate to the readings?

This brief paper offers responses to some of these questions.

Hearing the scriptures in stereo

"Having just one scripture reading enables me to get across one simple message," I was told by one Anglican minister recently. Apart from probably underestimating the congregation, such a viewpoint hears wants the scriptures to be heard in 'mono'. Yet the Christian tradition has always set two or more readings for corporate worship. Here the scriptures are heard in 'stereo' as it were – one passage feeds into and out of another, encouraging a 'bifocal' perspective. Where one reading only is used, it has probably been chosen by the preacher, and its 'reading' is likely to be framed by the preacher's concerns more than heard in its own right. For a lecture, Bible study or evangelistic meeting this approach carries weight. But for a regular Sunday or other main service, this

² See further C.H. Sherlock, 'Food of the Soul: Thomas Cranmer and Holy Scripture', *Aust Journal of Liturgy* 2/3 (1990) 134-141.

³ See *The Revised Common Lectionary* (London: Canterbury Press, 1992) for full tables, commentary and the history of development of this system.

narrows the congregation's diet and raises the danger of choice based on clergy predilections.

The English Reformers, as noted earlier, sought to bring back the scriptures to the centre of public worship, as the fundamental means by which God's people feed on Christ. As Article VI memorably begins, 'Holy scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation ..', creating the expectation that readers will hasten to discover such necessities of true life (as they might rush to the fridge when someone says 'this has all you need to make a sumptuous banquet'). And, rather than entrusting interpretation in the first place to priests and scholars, the Reformers insisted that the primary way to understand the scriptures was by comparing scripture with scripture (cf Article XX). These principles undergird the inclusion in services of the Word (such as Morning Prayer or Evensong) of a reading from each Testament, and readings from both epistles and gospels in Holy Communion. As indicated above, contemporary lectionaries blend these structures into a three-fold system of Old / First Testament / Acts, epistle, and gospel (plus psalmody). This can be a bit much on some occasions, and selection from the range offered may need to be made, for example, when many children are present, or for a baptism service: but the 'stereophonic' principle still applies.

In more contemporary theological terms, the 'conversation' between passages drawn from different parts of the scriptures is intended to draw us to a dynamic hearing of God's Word written. As with Christian prayer, this 'conversation' reflects the dynamic, triune nature of the living God, and the living Word of God. Reducing the conversation to a monologue runs the danger of 'flattening' our understanding of the scriptures – and possibly diminishing our understanding of the God revealed in the God's Word written.

Moving from First to New Testament

The order in which lessons are read has followed two patterns – Old / First Testament before New in Morning & Evening Prayer (with both surrounded by psalms and canticles), and Epistle before Gospel in Holy Communion. As noted above, AAPB and APBA combine this in the order O/FirstT, psalm (responding to the O/FirstT), Epistle, Gospel, followed by the sermon and Creed.

Is there something special about this ordering? Given that the sermon follows the Gospel (whether immediately, or after the Creed), some argue that preaching at the Eucharist should always be from the Gospel. But if the sermon is preached primarily from the OT lesson, could the order be Epistle, Gospel, OT, sermon, psalm? Or if the sermon is on the Epistle, could the order be OT, psalm, Gospel, Epistle, sermon? Several interacting principles are involved.

Changing the order so that a New Testament lesson precedes an Old / First Testament reading undercuts the relationship between the Testaments. Indeed, the term 'Old' runs the risk of seeing the canonical Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures as secondary, un-Christian or superseded. With good reason many scholars prefer to describe them as the 'First Testament', reflecting their standing as the original written revelation of God, accepted as such by Jesus and the early churches. On the other hand, for Christians to describe the gospels, epistles and Revelation as the 'Second' Testament would be decidedly unhelpful: they remain the 'New' Testament, dependent for their understanding on the 'First'. The use of such asymmetrical terms may look odd, but it emphasises both the necessity, distinctiveness and inter-relationship of both Testaments in Christian faith and scripture.⁴

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Cf Hebrews 8-10, and Paul's interesting use of 'first' (*protos*), 'second' (*deuteros*) and 'last' (*'eschatos*) Adam in relation to understanding what it means to be human in Christ (1 Corinthians 15.42ff).

The priority of the Gospels

What then of changing the order of epistle and gospel reading from the New Testament? Associated with this is the long-standing custom – required in BCP and successive Anglican prayer books – that the people stand to hear the Gospel reading. Some object to this practice, on the grounds that it lends greater importance to the Gospels than other sections of the scriptures. And it could also be argued that since the Gospels precede other books in the traditional arrangement of the New Testament, this order is permissible or even preferable when it comes to reading in church.

Perhaps the most appropriate response to such an objection is to ask, "Which scriptures would you translate first into the language of a people who have just begun to have the Gospel preached to them?" Or, "Which scriptures would you read first to young Christian children?" Or, "Which scriptures would you recommend to a person enquiring about Christian faith?" In most cases the relevant answer would be 'one of the Gospels, since they speak of Jesus Christ'. Such questions illuminate the reality that some passages of scripture **are** more important than others. The issue of what texts are crucial at a particular time calls for spiritual discernment, related to pastoral need, social context and theological situation in view.⁵ This discernment will have both corporate and personal dimensions: corporate, since the reading of the holy scriptures is an ecclesial activity, and individual, since clergy have a personal calling to ensure that their reading takes place within the people of God (cf *Concerning the Service of the Church* again).⁶

The Gospels thus have a priority in both Christian practice, and their placement within the New Testament. Neither perspective brings into question the inspiration of 'all scripture'. If the Gospels come first in the New Testament because the latter presents them to readers to be read first, their reading forms the climax of hearing scripture in the Ministry of the Word in the Holy Communion because they are the key to 'all scripture'.

In the interpretation of the scriptures as a whole, the teaching and example of Jesus Christ according to the Gospels is central – in theological terms, the living Word is the key to the Word written. Interpretation, and thus preaching, is more than a quantitative or logical summation of scriptural texts: at best, it involves the qualitative discernment of the revelation of God's ways and will, centred in the person of Jesus Christ. Whether or not the Gospel reading is the basis for the sermon, its propinquity serves to orient the preaching around Christ as heard in the Gospel.

'Stand up! Stand up for Jesus!'

The custom of standing to hear the Gospel in the Eucharist is sometimes contested, as noted above. Some point out that the congregation normally remains seated if the New Testament reading at Morning or Evening Prayer is from the Gospels: why then stand to hear the Gospel reading in a Eucharistic setting?

⁵ See further G.C Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) chapter 6 for a careful discussion, from a Reformed perspective, of 'central' texts in interpretation. It is important to note that I am not arguing that any passage of scripture can be ignored or excluded from the canon – far from it: genealogy may appear pointless to literate westerners, for example, but is central for understanding identity for many from oral cultures. But if all texts are equal, then (to paraphrase George Orwell), some texts are more equal than others.

⁶ The primacy of an ecclesial context for readings the holy scriptures is brought out well in the Faith & Order text, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, available at www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/iv-interpretation-the-meaning-of-our-words-and-symbols/a-treasure-in-earthen-vessels-an-instrument-for-an-ecumenical-reflection-on-hermeneutics.html

Standing has the practical value of encouraging *listening* as well as reading – indeed, it discourages following along with a pew Bible. The latter custom may be helpful when a reading from the prophets or an epistle is in the form of an argument rather than a narrative, or to follow a didactic address. It less helpful, however, when priority is given to listening, not least to the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. And *standing* to listen to the words and deeds of Christ in the context of the sacrament of the Eucharist pushes us beyond *my* to *our* listening. It indicates the tangible response we are called to make to Christ, as a body: not only the personal assent of mind and heart, but a public, corporate commitment to hear and follow Christ *together* as we prepare to gather at the Lord's table. Further, in the context of the Eucharist, standing indicates the *sacramental* character of the Word read, the 'outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given unto us by Christ, as a means whereby we receive the same' (ie Christ), as the BCP Catechism puts it. The table of the Word thus converses rather than competes with the table of the Lord.

In this light, it is rather 'odd' to stand for the Gospel, then to sit to hear a different passage from which the sermon is to be preached. Reversing the received order so that the Gospel is not next to the sermon will almost certainly mean that it is perceived as one of several readings, whose order and inter-relation is deemed not to matter. Such practices run the risk of reducing the formative impact of a congregation hearing the Word *together*, to a process of collective cognition for a group of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time. This is not to deny that the task of Christian education is highly important, especially in a mission context: not every Christian is familiar with or at home in the scriptures. But it does raise questions about the extent to which education 'according to the scriptures' is formative and transformative, rather than merely informative.

Teaching and meditating upon the scriptures is a vital part of the formation of Christian disciples. But, this paper has argued, the order and manner in which they are heard in congregational worship are crucial to the formation of the members of Christ's body, *as a body*, not as a mere collective. Personal learning is good, but it is not the same as the dynamic, corporate movement represented by standing for the climactic Gospel reading, to hear Christ together in the 'audible Word', as together we move to encounter Christ in the gospel enacted, the 'visible Word'.

Conclusion

Custom is not always the best guide to the future: tradition can become a fossil rather than a torch. But if this reflection rings true, it lends weight to customary practice when it comes to reading and hearing the holy scriptures. Hearing in stereo, following the movement from First to New Testament, and entering into the sacrament of the living Word, audible and visible – these are the means by which God's people may receive God's holy Word, both individually with mind and heart, and corporately as members together of Christ's body.

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