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A Revised Lectionary?

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There has been much discussion recently about the translation of the Bible to be used in a new edition of *The Lectionary for Mass*. This is an important issue. Most commentators are agreed that the new edition needs to use a translation which is accurate, inclusive and suitable for listening to in church. It seems to me, however, that more is needed. The contents of the *Lectionary* need to be revised as well as using a new translation. The typical edition of *The Lectionary for Mass* was published by the Vatican in 1969.¹ Vernacular editions appeared the following year, including two versions in English for use in Ireland, one using the *RSV* and the other using *The Jerusalem Bible*. After five decades in use, this is a good time to assess its strengths and weaknesses.

The present *Lectionary* is a great achievement. The three-year cycle for Sundays makes it possible to read each of the Synoptic Gospels over the course of the year. The seasons are catered for very well. I think that the readings for Advent and Eastertide are particularly well chosen. The merits of the *Lectionary* are confirmed by the fact that it has been adopted by many Anglican and Lutheran Churches as the basis for their lectionaries. However, that does not mean it cannot be improved upon. I am not suggesting a radical revision, but some adjusting here and there in the light of the experience of the past fifty years. A revised *Lectionary* would need to take account of the Season of Creation and of the issues which have arisen in relation to some of the Scripture passages. Some of the readings in the present *Lectionary* need to be rearranged, shortened or omitted for pastoral reasons.

A DEVELOPMENT IN THE LITURGICAL YEAR

In recent years it has become customary to refer to the period from September 1 to October 4 as the *Season of Creation*. September 1 is the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation originally proposed by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and then endorsed by Pope Francis. October 4 is the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi.

¹ *Missale Romanum: Ordo lectionum missae* (Rome, Vatican Polyglot Press, 1969).

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The Season of Creation is a response to the growing awareness of environmental issues so well expressed by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. However, the Season of Creation has not been given a place in the Liturgical Year.

The Liturgical Year celebrates the mystery of Christ. The core of the Liturgical Year is Easter when we celebrate the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Lent, Eastertide and Pentecost are extensions of this. Every Sunday is a little Easter. In the seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany we celebrate the Incarnation of Christ. This is not something separate from what we celebrate at Easter. Rather, the Paschal Mystery presupposes the Incarnation. Christ had to become incarnate in order to go through the Paschal Mystery. In the same way, the Incarnation presupposes creation. The creation of the universe is also part of the mystery of Christ, because “all things were created through him and for him” (Colossians 1: 16). So, the celebration of creation should have a place in the Liturgical Year.

As the period from September 1 to October 4 has quite providentially become the Season of Creation, it would seem appropriate that the liturgical celebration should take place at this time. It could be incorporated into Ordinary Time. Sunday as the first day of the week is the day of creation. As the “eighth day” it is also the day of the new creation. At a minimum, the first Sunday of September could be designated the Sunday of Creation with appropriate Scripture readings and prayers. A revised *Lectionary* would be able to provide suitable readings for the period. There is plenty of material in the Book of Genesis, the Psalms and the Wisdom literature. *The Roman Missal* would also need to be revised to accommodate this development.

A THREE-YEAR CYCLE

Generally, the selection of readings for Sundays is very satisfactory. However, on the weekdays in Ordinary Time some of the readings are too long, for instance, the readings from Maccabees in Week 33 and from Daniel in Weeks 34 of Year 1. There are also examples of where the narrative is truncated so that essential parts of the story are left out, as in the story of Jacob in Genesis. The First Reading for Week 14, Year 1, is from Genesis 32: 23-33 which gives us the incident where Jacob wrestled with God at the ford of the Jabbok. This incident prepares Jacob for the meeting with his brother Esau, about which he is frightened, but which turns out to be a reconciliation between the brothers. However, the *Lectionary* skips over the next eight chapters and misses out on this significant event. Another lack in the present *Lectionary* is that the Wisdom

Books do not feature very much. It seems to me that if there were a three-year cycle for the weekdays of Ordinary Time, more space would be provided so that the over-long readings could be broken up, the truncated narratives could be filled out and more material from the Wisdom literature could be included. It would also fit better with the three-year Sunday cycle.

PASTORAL SENSITIVITY

There is also the issue of readings which are pastorally unsuitable. These are readings which need to be understood in their historical and cultural context and it is not always possible to explain this in a short homily. Examples are those concerning the treatment of women and slaves.

Some of the problematic references to *women* have already been removed. The Second Reading for the Feast of the Holy Family, Year A, in the *Lectionary* is Colossians 3: 12-21. The last section of this reading tells wives “to give way to their husbands in all things.” The option to omit verses 18 to 21 was approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments at the request of the Irish Episcopal Conference in 1994.² A similar option was approved for Ephesians 5: 21-33 which occurs on the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B and on Tuesday of Week 30 in Ordinary Time, Year 2. The verses which may be omitted are 21 to 24 which include the idea that “wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord.” These examples show that the kind of adjustments which I am recommending can be made. They also show that the Irish Bishops are sensitive to these pastoral considerations.

The First Reading for Wednesday of Week 30 in Ordinary Time, Year 2, is from Ephesians 6: 1-9 which tells *slaves* to be obedient to their masters. It is true that St Paul also tells the masters to treat their slaves well, which in the context of the time may have been the best advice he could give. Nevertheless, the slave trade is one of the great stains on the history of Christian Europe and anything that seems to excuse it should be avoided. There is the added issue, which was not there in St Paul’s day, that slavery in recent centuries has been associated with race and so, his comments could be misconstrued as endorsing racism.

AVOIDING NEGATIVE REFERENCES TO THE JEWS

Another important issue is the treatment of the *Jews* in some readings. Unfortunately, at the time the New Testament was written there was tension between Christians and Jews. A negative

2 *Liturgical Calendar for Ireland* (Dublin, Veritas), Liturgical Note 15, p. 19.

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attitude to the Jews is reflected in some passages. It is important that a negative attitude is not perpetuated today. Repeated negative references to any group can give a subliminal message that these people are not to be trusted. The murder of six million Jews by the Nazis did not come out of nowhere. What should have been unthinkable was made possible by centuries of Christian polemic and prejudice. This issue must be dealt with either by avoiding certain passages or by a more sensitive translation.

Some passages can be avoided altogether without distorting the message of the Gospel. For instance, on Monday of Easter Week the Gospel reading is Matthew 28: 8-15 which is the account of Jesus appearing to the women after his resurrection. Verses 11 to 15 tell us that the guards went to the chief priests who paid them to say that the body was stolen and that “to this day this is the story among the Jews.” This section adds nothing to the resurrection account but casts the Jews in a bad light. It would be best omitted.

There are also examples where an alternative reading could be found. For instance, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C, the reading from Acts 13 tells us that the Jews worked on the devout women of the upper classes and the leading men of Antioch in Pisidia to make trouble for Paul and Barnabas. There are other incidents from the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas which could be chosen instead.

SENSITIVE TRANSLATION

There are many references to the Jews in St John’s Gospel. Some of these portray the Jews in a positive way. This Gospel, in fact, emphasises the Jewishness of Jesus with many references to his going up to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage feasts. In Chapter 4 the Samaritan woman recognises him as a Jew and Jesus tells her that “salvation comes from the Jews” (John 4: 22). In other passages the Jews are simply the people of Judea, as with the neighbours of Lazarus and his sisters. “Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to sympathise with them over their brother” (John 11: 16). However, there are some instances where the opponents of Jesus are simply referred to as “the Jews.” Care should be taken in translating these references. The context needs to be understood if these references are to be translated correctly. *Two* examples will help to illustrate what I mean.

In Chapter 9 Jesus heals the man born blind. After his cure the man was brought to the Pharisees. John 9: 13-16 is an account of his first encounter with the Pharisees. They refuse to believe that the man has been cured by Jesus because it has happened on the sabbath. Then the Pharisees send for the man’s parents and

interrogate them. This time the Pharisees are referred to as the Jews. “The Jews would not believe that the man had been blind and had gained his sight, without first sending for his parents and asking them” (John 9: 18-19). The parents do not want to get involved so the Pharisees decide to talk to the man himself again: “So the Jews again sent for the man” (John 9: 24). There are three references to “the Pharisees” and three to “the Jews.” It is clear that the same group of people are meant. Here “the Jews” should be rendered as “the Pharisees” with a footnote explaining that the Greek has literally “the Jews.”

The Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter is an important one where Jesus appears to the disciples on the evening of the day of his resurrection and again a week later (John 20: 19-29). We are told that “the doors were locked for fear of the Jews.” It is clear from the context that the Jewish authorities are meant, not the Jewish people. It should be translated as the “the Jewish authorities.”

The translation of Sacred Scripture used in the liturgy needs to take pastoral considerations into account. It should not be the same as a translation which is used for the purposes of study. *The Revised New Jerusalem Bible* and *The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* are both very good and could be used for a revised *Lectionary*. Whichever translation of the Bible is used for the next edition of the *Lectionary* a special liturgical version needs to be used. This is already accepted in principle. *The Jerusalem Bible* gives the Divine Name as “Yahweh.” The present *Lectionary*, even though it uses *The Jerusalem Bible*, gives the Divine Name as “the Lord” out of respect for the tradition of both the Synagogue and the Church not to utter the Divine Name in the liturgy.

AN EXCITING PROSPECT AND AN OPPORTUNITY

A new edition of the *Lectionary* is an exciting prospect. It is an *opportunity* to do more than just change the translation. Some of the improvements which I have suggested above, such as changing some readings or using a more nuanced translation, are within the competence of the Irish Episcopal Conference. Others, such as a three-year cycle for weekdays and the inclusion of the Season of Creation in the Liturgical Year, would have to be done by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. The Congregation would probably welcome suggestions on how to fine-tune *The Lectionary for Mass* fifty odd years after the publication of the typical edition. It is an opportunity to carry the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council a stage further.