

Sharing the living Word: looking at the lectionary as it approaches its golden jubilee.

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*Si enim iuxta apostolum Paulum Christus Dei uirtus est Deique sapientia*  
[cf. 1 Cor 1:24]; *et qui nescit scripturas, nescit Dei uirtutem eiusque*  
*sapientiam: ignoratio scripturarum* [referring the Old Testament],  
*ignoratio Christi est.*

Jerome, *Commentariorum in Isaiam*. Prologus (PL 24,17).<sup>1</sup>

The last half-century has been a unique time in the history of the relationship of the 'liturgical' churches with their scriptures. For the first time since the four tellings of 'the gospel' by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John gained currency in the liturgy,<sup>2</sup> a feature of church life that predates their status as part of 'the scriptures',<sup>3</sup> we have a thought-out and planned system for making use of them. The lectionary, or at least its

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<sup>1</sup> 'If, as the apostle Paul said, the Christ is the power of God and wisdom of God; then, whoever does not know the scriptures does not know either the power of God nor the wisdom of God: ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of the Christ.' The last phrase is frequently quoted, but is usually taken as referring to the gospels – but, as is clear from the context, Jerome is referring to 'the scriptures' of the first Christians (not to the whole canon much less to the New Testament) and his concern is with ignorance of what we refer to as the Old Testament.

<sup>2</sup> This must have occurred in the period before 150 CE, not only from what we learn from Justin but because of the way the four were already being gathered in codices; see T.C. Skeat, 'The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels,' *New Testament Studies* 43(1997)1-34.

<sup>3</sup> We can distinguish between a time in the second century when our four gospels had 'authority' and before that time (c. 180) when they were to be considered as 'canonical' by analogy with 'the [Old Testament] scriptures'; see T. O'Loughlin, 'The *Protevangelium Iacobi* and the Status of the Canonical Gospels in the Mid-Second Century,' in G. Guldentops, C. Laes, and G. Partoens eds, *Felici Curiositate: Studies in Latin Literature and Textual Criticism from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century: In Honour of Rita Beyers* (Turnhout 2017), 3-21.

evangelary, which came into use among the Roman Catholics in 1970<sup>4</sup> has steadily gained more and more admirers, and now as the Revised Common Lectionary,<sup>5</sup> is one of newest, but also one of the most creative, liturgical texts in Christian history.

Imitation is a measure of its value in filling a recognised need, and it steadily attracts new users. This lectionary is a true milestone in the history of our liturgical books – more significant than the appearance in the middle ages of the missal as a single book and probably on a par with the uniformity of ritual that was a by-product of printed texts – but it rarely receives the accolades it merits. Its appearance has raised so few ripples that few ever think to mention it among the events in Christianity of the past fifty years.<sup>6</sup>

That those concerned with liturgy – or, at least, that sub-set of liturgists who are interested in the Liturgy of the Word – would have praised the lectionary is not surprising. The Reims Statement of 2011 is a succinct presentation of its glories and its possibilities.<sup>7</sup> But the general lack of awareness of it among Christians, even as a fact leaving aside its content, is a serious problem for all who are concerned with the life of a community that is formed as a community of memory – and where the gospels form the core of that memory (and which is itself embedded in the memory of

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<sup>4</sup> Promulgated in 1969 as the *Ordo lectionum missae*.

<sup>5</sup> This was ‘released’ in 1994 – there is a complete course in ecclesiology in the study of the verbs used by the different churches with reference to the appearance of liturgical books – and there were several trial versions of a common lectionary in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, it was often adopted after a series of careful experiments such as the Church of England’s ‘1978 Lectionary’ – now largely forgotten, it was a sign of the care that many churches put into the reform of their liturgies; see G. Cuming ed., *The Ministry of the Word: A Handbook to the 1978 Lectionary* (Oxford 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Even studies of recent liturgical history after devoting chapters to architecture, language, and even new styles of vestments either fail to mention the lectionary or cover its appearance with a few paragraphs.

<sup>7</sup> This can be downloaded from [www.jlg.org.uk/Reims.pdf](http://www.jlg.org.uk/Reims.pdf) (accessed 25 March 2017).

Israel). All communities are communities of memory to a greater or lesser extent – shared experiences and conditions.<sup>8</sup> But this is especially true of religious communities who share a common inherited cosmos, their twice-told tale,<sup>9</sup> but this is *a fortiori* true of Judaism and Christianity whose basic claims are expressed as the remembered history of the *magnalia Dei* and the *magnalia Dei in Christo*. And, of course, these religions’ remembering has liturgical remembering at its core: hence the place they give their scriptures in their assemblies, so beautifully imagined in Luke’s vignette of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth.<sup>10</sup>

That the advent of a common lectionary is not noted as a ‘major event’ suggests that it is worth reflecting on causes of this blind spot is our liturgical awareness. That an ordinary Christian in one of the lectionary-using churches would not even know the word ‘lectionary’ is not in itself surprising: it is a technical term for a specialist liturgical instrument. But after nearly fifty years of use I wonder just how many of those who gather on a Sunday have even a faint notion about the selection of the texts they hear? My experience is that even among those who run bible study groups there is almost no grasp of the central logic of the lectionary: the selection is just a bundle of snippets – and if there is a logic such as ‘the year of Luke’ this is little more than an arcane algorithm akin to the grids found for working out moveable feasts or the Dominical Letter: in a short life it is best to just find out what is happening on the next

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<sup>8</sup> See P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge 1989).

<sup>9</sup> See J.Z. Smith, ‘A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religion’s History,’ *Numen* 48(2001)134-46.

<sup>10</sup> Lk 4:16-30; that Luke imagines this against the reading practice of the churches he himself knows may be indicated by the presence in Nazareth of a *huperetes* (at 4:20) the very title of those who keep the codices in the churches whose community service he recalls at 1:2 (see T. O’Loughlin, ‘*Huperetai* ... *tou logou*: does Luke 1:2 throw light on to the book practices of the late first-century churches?’ in H. Houghton ed., *Early Readers, Scholars and Editors of the New Testament* (Piscataway NJ 2014), 1-15.

day, and leave the rest to the boffins.<sup>11</sup> What is more surprising is the number of ministers who not only are unaware of the lectionary's architecture but treat it with practical contempt. At clergy-training workshops I sometimes offer a free copy of my book on the lectionary to anyone who can say, honestly, that they have looked at the tables in the lectionary's opening pages on the rationale for using the Synoptics: I have rarely had to give the prize!<sup>12</sup> This practical contempt is disturbing, and it takes analogous forms in the various churches. Among Roman Catholics one can find clergy who are punctilious about every rubric and syllable relating to the Liturgy of the Eucharist – here words appear crucial – but who blithely omit, *contra legem*, the First Reading on Sundays, or who shorten or replace other texts willy-nilly, while not seeing any relationship between their preaching and the gospel read. In other churches there is a willingness to simply see the lectionary as providing one option, so why not another? While the notion that the day's 'text' is but the headline for the preaching persists and if a preacher has been chosen who is given the choice of topic, there is the implication that with that election goes the choice of lections. These approaches share the assumption that an individual, at a single moment, has a better grasp of the complexity of our gospel memory than a textually justified and patterned set of sections from the gospels over a span of three years. That such problems exist at the community level is not, in itself, surprising – problems of confused and mistaken liturgical practice can be found as early as the mid-first century as we see in 1 Cor – but there is significant evidence indicating that even church authorities have little

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<sup>11</sup> On the numerous lectionary websites, this is exactly what is given; yet these sites are ideally placed to impart background knowledge on the lectionary's structure. By contrast, the opening pages of service books – where the logic of the lectionary is most accessibly laid out – are among the least consulted pages on liturgy: introductions, whether dealing with the vagaries of the calendar or the order of the lections, seem to be particularly off-putting.

<sup>12</sup> T. O'Loughlin, *Making the Most of the Lectionary: A User's Guide* (London 2012).

awareness of the lectionary. In much of the English-speaking world, for example, the national conferences of Catholic bishops have not seen the destruction of the lectionary's plan for Ordinary Time as a significant event: they have moved 'Holydays of Obligation' to Sundays without asking any questions about what this does to the lectionary, and some are quite prepared to sanction theme-Sundays with special readings without demur. In their scale of things, the lectionary is not a priority. And one can find parallel instances in other churches: it seems that for many so long as one reads something 'appropriate,' authorities do not see what the fuss is about! So this great liturgical reform, this radically new event, has suffered from a 'lack of reception' in the churches. But before anyone jumps to suggest that this indicates there is no need for a lectionary, we should note that the failure to receive the lectionary stems more from a lack of understanding than positive rejection.

Given that the liturgy is not only the ideal locale in which the gospel is heard, but is often the only place where a passage from a gospel is heard, it seems useful to reflect on our relationship with the lectionary and explore this failure to appreciate it. So what I shall offer here is not a single, connected argument, but rather some snapshots of what the lectionary offers us and the challenge facing us if we are to do justice to the new event, a properly designed lectionary, in the history of worship.

Embarking on these reflections I am conscious that I am writing in 2017 – on the eve of the fifth centenary of Martin Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*: an event which was to have such implications for the whole of Christian liturgy and for the role the scriptures in Christian life. For many language communities in Europe this was simultaneously a liturgical and a biblical event – for the first time they had the liturgy

in their own language and were encouraged that hearing, and in the new world of print: reading, the scriptures was part of the Christian life. Yet it was also an event that caused division, pain, and polarisation. One can track the development of the logic of oppositions in theology and practice: what *they do* is what *we will not do*, and what we hold we will express in this way so that there is clear water between us. For over four hundred years, one half of the western church placed so much emphasis on the Ministry of the Word that the Liturgy of the Eucharist became an occasional add-on; while the other half did the reverse: the Liturgy of the Word became a silent and irrelevant prelude. For one group, readings, hymns and preaching became normal worship; for the other, the readings were but ‘the Mass of the Catechumens,’ hidden behind a screen of Latin, prior to the real concerns of the ‘Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.’ Both sides were mutually impoverished. Then gradually in the mid-twentieth century the scene changed; and the new lectionary is both an example of what can be achieved when we learn from each other and a beacon towards what can yet happen. This is, however, not some necessary progress, but the new lectionary is like a prophetic ‘light in a dark place’ (2 Pet 1:19) of what can be achieved when Christians openly note their problems and recognise that working together they achieve far more than when eyeing each through a lens of sectarian distrust. Consequently, on this great centenary it is worth recalling that some of the basic ideas for the lectionary began with French Protestants in the 1950s, it was reformulated by Catholics in Rome in the 1960s, and revised by Presbyterians in North America in 1980s. Indeed, it has been adopted by many churches without a tradition of using a formal lectionary. Indeed, we should acclaim the lectionary as a great symbol of forming from out many voices an harmonious song of praise such as Acts 2:1-13 imagined as the ideal gift of the Spirit.

### *The liturgy as the locale of the scriptures*

After centuries of widespread private book owning among clergy and even longer of silent private reading, that we think of the scriptures primarily as books – it seems obvious: ‘scriptures’ are, literally, the written things and these come to us as books and are even named as such: ‘the Book of Genesis’ for instance.<sup>13</sup> As such their identity for us is as *things we read*, and we read privately even when we are in a group. The book has an existence that comes to its completion when someone picks it off the shelf – note that already we are in a library alone rather than in a chapel as part of a congregation – and sits down at a desk and reads it.<sup>14</sup> Nearby are other books for comparison, some means of writing notes, and, ideally, an atmosphere of quiet that prevents interruption in a personal task. For many Christians such ‘bible reading’ is an important religious activity whether done individually or with the support of a group setting; and if one takes part in such a bible study one imagines a group with each having her/his own books. Indeed, the group is a function of the commonality of the book each individual wants to study.

Moreover, we assume that we can have many books in convenient close proximity.

My full edition of the NRSV contains no fewer than 85 biblical texts and weighs only 950gms, I even assume I can have several copies so that I do not have to carry it from

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<sup>13</sup> This is a major theme in studies of the sociology of reading and it has now been taken up some whose work is explicitly devoted to biblical exegesis. See, for example, D. Rhoads, ‘Biblical Performance Criticism: Performance as Research,’ *Oral Tradition* 25(2010)157-98.

<sup>14</sup> Bear in mind that our working image of books (from a well-stocked bookcase) and our desk reflects modern culture rather than that in which our scriptures were produced; see B.M. Metzger, ‘When did Scribes begin to use Writing Desks?’ in B.M. Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian* (Leiden 1968), 123-37.

home to office, or even from room to room (and even less weight would be as an app on my phone). Many would not consider that there should be 85 texts in a bible, and so their copies would be even lighter if only by a few grams. Contrast this with the scene of Ceolfrith leaving Tyneside for Rome almost exactly 1300 years ago in 716: that he had all the biblical books (but not as many as my NRSV) between two boards as a single bible (then so rare that it was given a special name: a pandect) weighing many kilograms was a cause of wonder, and that Ceolfrith had had *three* such pandects made while abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow merited a mention from both his biographers.<sup>15</sup> It is fascinating to note how often those engaged in biblical studies just assume their own world of libraries, the easy availability of texts, and even desks apply to their biblical authors. More importantly, we all share a presumption that our view of books, and so our view of the bible, is somehow normative. This has important implications for our study of the lectionary. First, we often think in terms of ‘using the bible in worship’: the bible is an *ens in se* and one of its many uses is supplying a necessary ‘biblical’ element in liturgy. Consequently, the study of its use in worship – and its use in lectionaries - is a secondary activity to the primary task of attention to it as a text. This focus on ‘the book’ tacitly ignores that the actual texts we read we largely formed in a liturgical situation and they still bear the marks of that origin as living texts in the life of the churches and especially the context of worship.<sup>16</sup> Second, most of our attention to the bible operates on the assumption that the bible is a well defined ‘something.’ That attention is, unwittingly, a function of a piece of fourth-century theological speculation that the canon is primordial and has an

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<sup>15</sup> Bede, *Historia abbatum*, 15 (C. Grocock and I.N. Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford 2013), 56-9; and Bede is followed by the anonymous author of the *Vita Ceolfridi* [*Historia abbatum auctore anonymo*], 20 (Grocock and Wood, 98-9), who is equally amazed at the feat.

<sup>16</sup> See D.C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge 1997).



authority before we look inside the texts. But before there was a prescriptive canon ('the inspired list of books'), there was functional canon ('a list of inspired books')<sup>17</sup> – and that canon related to what was actually read in the churches' liturgy.

However, we have our canonical texts because the early communities treasured these documents because they repeatedly used them, and heard them, in their assemblies. Indeed, the actual caring for the texts, literally treasuring them, may have been, by Luke's time, the responsibility of specially designated people in each church.<sup>18</sup> We know that they were diffused through being shared by communities and read in communities, and the fact that we have several, so similar, texts of the gospels is explicable by their being the records of the performances of great evangelists – whose performances were recognised for their individuality. Hence Mark's account was still valued by those who had Matthew and Luke, and attempts, in the face of external attacks from the likes of Celsus, to produce a single more coherent, and consistent account, met with little success. This failure to produce a diatessaron is usually ascribed to some vague theological motive, but this is no more than thinking in terms of the canon as the primordial reality. The failure of a diatessaron to displace a multiplicity of evangelists' texts was the outcome of practice: these gospels (or more precisely these telling of 'the [one] gospel') were what communities had used, were used to using, and which were being successfully diffused and reproduced, and with which they were familiar from repetition in liturgy. And such embedded ritual practices, no matter how confusing, are very hard to change.

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<sup>17</sup> On this distinction of functional and prescriptive canons, see K.W. Folkert, 'The "Canons" of "Scripture"' in M. Levering ed., *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany NY, 1989), 170-9.

<sup>18</sup> See O'Loughlin, '*Huperetai ... tou logou.*'

We have to think of our origins in terms of communities of shared memories – whose sense of themselves was subject to all the flux that accompanies group memories – and who used texts in lieu of living performers. The book was a vehicle of virtual presence which, albeit more stable in content than the living voice, supported memory which itself continued to evolve in each community. Memory was not only the source of their identity, but was the means by which they adapted and readapted to the demands of their commitment to Christianity across not only the *oikoumene* of the Greco-Roman world, but, as the *Acts of Thomas* bears witness, beyond it. It was when the communities assembled – and all the evidence points to these assemblies being shared meal gatherings – that they performed the contents of their memories: our texts.<sup>19</sup> There was a group and there were performances – and the book, as such, is a by-product.<sup>20</sup>

Pliny famously comments on how he threw a dinner, with no expense spared, for which he hired *Gaditanae* (dancing girls from Cadiz) as part of the entertainment,<sup>21</sup> we have to imagine far simpler feasts within the churches with occasionally a visiting apostle or prophet,<sup>22</sup> or a roving teacher, or perhaps an evangelist staying for a few

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<sup>19</sup> Justin's account – mid-second century - of the such a eucharistic meal is our most explicit evidence for this in the place it gives to the *apomnemonemata* of the apostles (see *First Apology* 66,3); and we have to set this in the context of the famous comment by Papias – probably also mid-second century – that he preferred the living voice to a book (Fragment 3,4 in Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3,39). On the transference of the Liturgy of the Word from after the meal to before the eating of a token among of food and the drinking of a token amount of wine, see C. Leonhard, 'Morning *salutationes* and the Decline of Sympotic Eucharists in the Third Century,' *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 18(2014)420-42.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, B. Loubser, 'How do you report something that was said with a smile? - Can we overcome the loss of meaning when oral-manuscript texts of the Bible are represented in modern print media?' *Scriptura* 87(2004)296-314.

<sup>21</sup> *Epistola* 1,15,3.

<sup>22</sup> See J.A. Draper, 'Social Ambiguity and the Production of the Text: Prophets, Teachers, Bishops, and Deacons and the Development of the Jesus Tradition in the

days and giving a performance of his account of the common memory; but more often than not, the meal taking place without any such guest and the memory being performed by a reader from a codex. This performance of the Christian memory, whether that memory was held in a mind or a codex, was first and foremost a community event. When, indeed, a codex was used by an individual for private reading it was as a secondary activity done in terms of preparing materials for the community's benefit. The assembled group's needs were not one more use for the book, rather the book existed because it was way through which the assembly could carry out its task. When, for example, we read Justin's account of the community meal we see that he assumes that the memories remembered, the *apomnemoneumata*: 'memoirs of the apostles which we call gospels', as those of the community for the community, by the community: they are not private books betimes given a public outing for the purposes of edification.<sup>23</sup> The texts became our 'scriptures' when as a community, and by 'community' we do not mean as an abstract idea but an assembly of people, shared them and used them in the context of praising God.

This memory is a living memory – remembering is always an activity in the present time – and it has always been a multiform reality: the memory took different shapes with each act of remembering, each celebration constituting a new moment in the tradition. Likewise, each performer of the memory gave it another dimension.

Consequently, today, it is meaningful to speak of the theology of Matthew as distinct

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Community of the *Didache*' in C.N. Jefford ed., *The Didache in Context: Essays on its Text, History, and Transmission* (Leiden 1995), 284-312; idem, 'The "Theatre of Performance" and "The Living Word" of Jesus in the Farewell Discourse(s) in John's Gospel,' *Journal of Early Christian History* 4(2014)26-43; and idem, 'Performing the Cosmic Mystery of the Church in the Communities of the *Didache*,' in J. Knight and K. Sullivan eds, *The Open Mind: Essay in Honour of Christopher Rowland* (London 2015), 37-57.

<sup>23</sup> *First Apology* 66,3

from Mark, or several theologies of Q, and to recognise that these are all distinct from that of Paul writing in a radically different environment before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Nor is it appropriate today – a fact recognised in our lectionary’s architecture – to seek to reduce this theological diversity and richness of perspectives to a uniformity of some sort or other. As such, our ‘gospels’ [i.e. the texts] were the texts used by the gossellers, before those men were seen as the writers of gossels texts. What, then, is *a* gospel? It is the text of the performance given by one of those who were known as ‘evangelists’: our use of *euaggelion* - as the name of a text - came from *euaggelista*, not vice versa.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, it is the plurality of these memories of ‘the gospel’ – as many as there were *euaggelistai* – that is the basis of our lectionary’s arrangement of the gossels on Sundays over the three-year cycle. As the performance of the memory shifted from being an evangelist who-is-the-performer-of-the-memory to a performance from a recording-of-the-performer-from-a-codex we see the need for the performance to be spread over several assemblies: what could be an extended performance by an eminent guest, famed for his performance, had to be a selection of episodes when it was the work of a reader. Some, most famously Papias of Hierapolis, could still say that they preferred a living performer to a reader playing a book, but such performers were becoming rarer and were seen as exceptional: the book being read was the norm, and, as is the way with practices, it was soon normative.

If we think about this situation of early usage we see that we must alter how we think about the codex. From being a book containing one or more gossels, a repository of

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<sup>24</sup> See its use in Eph 4:11.

four textual artefacts, which can then be imagined as sectioned for use in the liturgy; we shift to thinking of the codex as, primarily, a liturgical resource that stored all those items for performance that were being used when there was no evangelist present – stored under the names of the great performers whose work was being re-played in their absence in episodes. Imagined in this way the four-gospel codex is, functionally, a lectionary. Each such codex is a store of all the materials we that were commonly and repeatedly being used in liturgy. By the mid-second century, when it emerged, a four-gospel codex was valuable because it was an indispensable resource for the assemblies. We have a curious echo of this fact in that our manuscripts never present their texts as, for instance, ‘St Mark’s Gospel,’ but always as: ‘the gospel according to Mark.’ This is the form that corresponds both to early perceptions of these texts and to the manner of liturgical usage – and it is a fossilized vestige of those early gyrovagous gossellers whose visits were welcomed, regulated, and remembered.

But if the liturgy is the locale of remembering Jesus and ‘the gospel’ and is the antithesis of a bland uniformity: that ‘gospel’ is not to be simply identified with the texts we now call ‘the gospels.’ To be true to the nature of our inheritance from the early churches we must not only recognise that performance has priority over book, but equally that our performances must bear witness to the variety of the performance that were valued. In other words, we have to value to the whole extent of our gospel-inheritance in our performances. We have already mentioned that we have a long-standing habit of prioritising the notion of the book over the performance, but we have an equally sorry history of not valuing the variety of our sources. This leads me to my next point: what is so new about the 1969 lectionary and its derivative such as the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

### *The newness of the lectionary*

It is important that the new lectionary was not some ephemeral whim of ‘modernity,’ but a carefully considered response to the recognition of fundamental defects in the existing lectionary of the western Church for use at eucharistic assemblies. That lectionary had come to more or less its final form in the Middle Ages, and so had been inherited as the eucharistic lectionary of many other western churches. So, for example, the lectionary of the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* and of 1570 *Missale Romanum* are, for practical purposes, identical, and share exactly the same defects as lectionaries.<sup>25</sup> These faults were many, but by far the most glaring weakness was in the limited way it used a very small range of gospels’ material. In effect, it was passages from Matthew’s gospel read as the basic text of a diatessaron. This manner of reading the gospels, which was ‘canonised’ by Eusebius of Caesarea (c.26-c.340), not only failed to present the depth of the riches of having four overlapping gospels, but assumed that differences between the gospels were not to be seen as enrichments but as problems: either adding details or creating interpretational knots to be explained away.<sup>26</sup> How this became the manner of reading the gospels is a question for historians. But it was a matter for liturgists, in collaboration with gospels’ scholars, that the liturgy use of scripture, especially at eucharistic assemblies:

- (1) failed to utilise what was its original richness;

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<sup>25</sup> See T. O’Loughlin, *Making the Most of the Lectionary*, 144-8 where these two lectionaries are compared day by day.

<sup>26</sup> See T. O’Loughlin, ‘Harmonizing the Truth: Eusebius and the Problem of the Four Gospels,’ *Traditio* 65(2010)1-29.

- (2) presented a diatessaronic abstraction rather than an authentic witness to the kerugma which was remembered by the tradition in the variety of the four distinct voices;
- (3) failed to hear the original structure of each evangelist's presentation (though still claiming that it was 'the gospel according to' at the beginning of each lection, the actual structure of the lectionary meant that the texts were being read absolutely);
- (4) assumed a manner of reading the gospels in the liturgy that we were increasingly unwilling to accept in other uses of the gospels (e.g. in theology);
- (5) the lack of a rationale in the sectioning; and
- (6) there was a vast amount of material that simply did not surface in what was seen as the celebration that was 'the centre and summit of the Christian life.'<sup>27</sup>

The new lectionary was a conscious attempt to address these profound problems of proclamation and interpretation – and it can easily be shown to have addressed each of them.

As with every lectionary, the new lectionary is a compromise. But compromise is of the nature of lectionaries given that the material has to be fitted around a ritual year, the texts are less uniform in structure than we often recognise, they are often far more obscure than many involved in preaching or catechesis feel comfortable admitting,

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<sup>27</sup> Many Roman Catholics would argue that the biggest problem was the use of Latin – and certainly it was the disappearance of Latin that has been the most obvious marker of the reform of the Roman Catholic liturgy – but these problems with the lectionary were even more deep seated in that they affected everyone who used that lectionary such as Anglicans using it in English, Protestants using it in French [the first church to note its limitations], and Lutherans using it in a variety of languages.

and some of the texts we wish to use were not written with our liturgy's structures in mind.<sup>28</sup> But, however, one judges this compromise or its system to expose as much of the richness of the inheritance as possible, one must admit (1) that there is a structure and (2) the nature of our gospel inheritance has been taken into account in that structure. Never before had this basic problem of using the gospels in liturgy – that is using as books these records of oral performances – been explicitly addressed. If we assume that the shift from viewing them as recordings to books took place sometime in the latter half of the second century – let us pick on 170, the generation before Irenaeus, for convenience – and the new lectionary was first used in 1970, then we have to face the grim fact that we may have been living with a defective use of the gospels in eucharistic assemblies for around 1800 years – and for many Christians, Roman Catholics in particular, the idea that a real defect could persist from so early for so long was simply an appalling vista they cannot face. Here, I suspect, lies part of the reason we have not hailed the new lectionary for the massive step forward that it is – we like to think that all was 'deep down OK' and that the liturgical developments of the 1960s were simply a 'service before the MOT.'<sup>29</sup> The new lectionary should be

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<sup>28</sup> For example, many of the stories in the Old Testament are too long to be used in Sunday readings; some of the letters of Paul (or those attributed to him) lose their logic when read as a short lection; or Revelation does not provide lections that can easily be accommodated within the liturgy – the basic problem is that we have to respect *both* the texts and *the* liturgical situation of their use

<sup>29</sup> The rhetoric of continuity which is seen to get around the problem of 'if all is well, why are you changing' has plagued liturgical reform since the 1960s – witness the opening words of Vatican II's revolutionary Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy which began by praising the 'most holy council [*sacrosanctum concilium*] of Trent' as having really solved the problems (!) is a case in point. This was done partly to keep step with the earlier rhetoric that the Catholic Church was a 'perfect society' and partly in the belief that change frightened people, but the effect was to disguise the inherited problems and obscure the nature of the new solutions. By contrast, Marshall McLuhan's 1962 analysis of the problems by those using the inherited liturgy is stark and refreshing – a new human situation had arisen – which demanded liturgical change or liturgy would become irrelevant; see *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (London 1962), 137-41.



imagined, especially on in 2017 as we celebrate the fifth centenary of the Reformation, as a genuine reformation in our time. We – on all sides of the sixteenth-century divide – are restoring a part of the church's life to a better condition after a long period of confusion and corruption. There is no need retell here its key qualities – they are listed in the Reims Statement which I wish I could find as a leaflet to take away at the back of every church building and see on every church's website – but rather to note the need to celebrate the lectionary for the enormous achievement that it is! We should take pride in it, and thank God for it! Looking at the lectionary, we should simply affirm that it is good, indeed it is very good, and we should be thankful for all who worked on it, from across the spectrum of western Christianity, between the 1950s and the 1990s to produce the two principal forms in which it exists. But, at the same time, recognise that not all the problems have been solved, our lectionary usage needs to continue to evolve, and there is still a work to be done: *ecclesia semper reformanda*.