

The Lectionary – looking ahead

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We hear the lectionary Sunday by Sunday. We hear it in gobbets of usually no more than dozen sentences, incident by incident, bit by bit. The effect is that virtually everyone gathered for the liturgy never realise that the lectionary is a very carefully crafted piece of work. We tend to think of it as a jumble of readings – much in the way the pre-Vatican II lectionary was a muddle – and fail to see its architecture. Yet doing so can help us in preaching and give a sense of direction in the liturgy. Moreover, in every community there is now a little band of readers who perform their ministry week by week but have rarely been given a sense that they are giving voice to a very skilfully prepared set of readings.

So moving into the Year of Mark it is worth taking a look at the grid of the gospel readings for the year that is laid out in the introduction to the lectionary (vol. 1, pp. 1–11). It is this set of gospel readings as set out in the plan of the Year of Mark that then helps determine the first readings and the psalms for each Sunday. The second reading has no deliberate connection or common theme – though some find them – with this plan for the Year, and the schema for those second readings can be found on p. 11 of the lectionary.

But it can be handy to have an overview of the plan and it can be useful to copy it and give it to readers. So here it is:

This year is based on the semi-continuous reading of Mark (apart from his passion narrative: used at Easter), along with some passages from John. The lectionary is planned in three major units, and several ‘stages’ within these:

Lectionary Unit 1

This unit consists of just two Sundays which are seen to open the year / the gospel by focusing on the figure of Jesus the Messiah. This is expressed on the Feast of the Baptism (Sunday 1) with Mark’s account; and then the call of Andrew and his companion from John’s gospel (Sunday 2). The two events taken together provide the witness from heaven and earth to Jesus being the Promised One.

Lectionary Unit 2,1

This unit consists of twenty-one Sundays whose overall theme is the Mystery of Jesus being progressively revealed. It is made up of three stages:

1. Jesus with the Jewish crowds.
2. Jesus with his disciples.
3. Jesus’s manifestation of himself.

The first stage runs from the third to the ninth Sunday. In these gospels we encounter Jesus around the

Sea of Galilee, healing a leper and a paralytic, and answering questions about fasting and the Sabbath.

Lectionary Unit 2,2

The second stage of this unit, which is concerned with the Mystery of Jesus being progressively revealed, focuses on Jesus with his disciples. This stage runs from the tenth to the fourteenth Sunday. In these gospels we encounter Jesus facing serious criticism, preaching parables of the Kingdom, calming the storm, healing, and being rejected at Nazareth.

Lectionary Unit 2,3

This stage of the second unit (whose overall theme is the Mystery of Jesus being progressively revealed) focuses on Jesus's manifestation of himself. This stage is unusual in the lectionary for Ordinary Time in that it is made up of sections from John as well as Mark. It begins with two Sundays (15 -16) where Jesus gives The Twelve their mission and then manifests compassion on the crowds. This mention of crowds around Jesus is then the cue for a five-Sunday selection from Jn 6 on the Eucharist. The stage then concludes with two more gospel readings from Mark on Sundays 22 and 23.

Lectionary Unit 3,1

This unit consists of eleven Sundays (Sundays 24 to 34 inclusive) whose overall theme is the Mystery of the Son of Man. It is made up of three units:

1. The 'Way' of the Son of Man.
2. The final revelation in Jerusalem.
3. The fulfillment of the mystery.

The first stage runs from the twenty-fourth to the thirtieth Sunday. It opens with Peter's confession of faith and then the narrative that immediately follows in Mark.

Lectionary Unit 3,2

This stage consists of three Sundays (Sundays 31 to 33 inclusive) when we read of the final revelation of the identity of the Son of Man in Jerusalem.

Lectionary Unit 3,3

This stage consists of the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, when the Feast of Christ the King is seen as the liturgical celebration of the fulfilment of the mystery of the Son of Man. Although this is seen as the culmination of the Year of Mark, the end of the year's reflection on the Eschaton is taken from John.

The plan can be represented thus:

Unit	Stage	Sundays
1. The Figure of Jesus the Messiah		1 - 2

2. The Mystery progressively revealed	1. Jesus with the Jewish Crowds	3 - 9
	2. Jesus with his disciples	10 - 14
	3. Jesus manifests himself	15 - 23
3. The Mystery of the Son of Man	1. The 'Way' of the Son of Man	24 - 30
	2. Final revelation in Jerusalem	31 - 33
	3. The fulfilment of the mystery	34

Further Reading:

T. O'Loughlin, *Sunday Mass Readings: The Thinking Behind the Lectionary* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2010).

T. O'Loughlin, *Making the Most of the Lectionary: A User's Guide* (London: SPCK, 2012).