Sunday Matters

Reflections on the Lectionary Readings for Year A

Mark A O'Brien OP



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Dominican Series

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Introduction

Sunday matters or should matter to Christians. It is the Lord's day and so the most important day of the week, a time for us to acknowledge God as the source, centre and goal of our lives. Because Sunday is a matter of importance there are important matters to consider on this day, such as time for prayer, worship and being nourished by the Word of God. Sunday also matters because it is a limited amount of time and these days there are a host of other things competing for our time and attention: sport, shopping, TV, travel, etc. Deciding what to do on Sundays and other major days of the Christian calendar has become something of a challenge for contemporary Christians, some would say even a crisis.

But a crisis or a challenge can provide an opportunity to rethink and refocus. The reflections on the lectionary readings for Sundays and major feasts are designed to show that the Bible itself is an invitation or challenge to think. It does not impose its views because that would be most ungodlike—according to the biblical understanding of God. Much of life is about making decisions and the Bible challenges us to decide where our priorities lie. The reflections offered are relatively short (around eight hundred words each) so that all the Sundays and major feasts of a liturgical year can be included in one book. This volume covers year A of the Roman Catholic Lectionary; subsequent volumes will cover years B and C. This also meant that not every reading could be given equal attention.

These reflections originally appeared in the *Australasian Catholic Record* over a three year period as 'Reflections on the Readings of Sundays and Feasts' (2007—9).[1] Although not homilies they were composed with

1. I am grateful to Dr Gerard Kelly, President of the Catholic Institute of Sydney and editor of ACR, for inviting me to do the reflections.

homiletic preparation in mind. In the light of readers' comments and further reflection, some have been revised, others rewritten and new ones added in order to cover all the Sundays of the three-year cycle and make the material more accessible to the general reader as well as the preacher. Those who do not have a lectionary or follow its cycle of readings can easily correlate biblical text and reflection by consulting the index at the back of the book.

It may be of help to readers to outline briefly some of the major ways in which the Bible has been read over the centuries and some of the major themes that I judge the Bible addresses. A good starting point is the recognition that we all communicate by expressing something in a certain way or form and within a certain context. In the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament the preferred literary forms are narrative (story, report, genealogy, etc), poetry (psalms, proverbs, prophecies) and law (commands, prohibitions, instructions); in the New Testament they are narrative (in the gospels and Acts of the Apostles) and letters (of Paul and others). A literary form provides a creative opportunity yet imposes limitations. For example, a story usually involves a plot (such as overcoming an evil) with a limited cast of characters. A storyteller has to develop the plot towards some form of resolution and this means being selective, otherwise the story could become too unwieldy and lose something of its impact.

What authors include in or leave out of their compositions is also influenced by their historical and social context. The context in which ancient authors operated had no equivalent to the modern novel with its intricate plots, large cast of characters and elaborate detail—but even these have their limitations. Most biblical stories or parables, songs or prophecies, are fairly short and it is likely much of what we have in the Bible are written 'distillations' of longer oral performances.[2] Writing in ancient times was time consuming and expensive: it is unlikely a scribe could write down all of an actual performance. To my mind they were very adept at recording the outline of a story or song, the key elements that would guide further performances. Stories, poems, gospels and letters were written for public proclamation, elaboration and comment. Thankfully, this is still the case for our Sunday liturgies in which a short selection of texts from the Bible is proclaimed for us to listen to, to preach on and to discuss. People in ancient times had excellent memories but they also had a smaller corpus of material to memorise. We now have to rely on computers and memory

2. On storytelling for example, see Antony F Campbell 'The Storyteller's Role: Reported Story and Biblical Text', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002) 427-41.

sticks to store an ever increasing corpus of texts that is beyond our capacity to memorise.

I have been trained in modern western critical methods of reading the Bible but I also respect the traditional ways of reading that have been used in the church and synagogue since their inception. Both have to operate with the fundamental premise that one can only understand what a text is communicating by paying close attention to the way it is communicating (in story, poem or letter form). We all do this instinctively with literature with which we are familiar: we distinguish headline from commentary, editorial from a letter to the editor, advertisement from operating manual. Sporting enthusiasts know that a headline announcing 'cats maul dogs' is about a football match not a brawl between pets. When we come to the literature of another culture we need to be aware that two different contexts are coming in contact—our own and that of the other culture.

One could say that the traditional way of reading the Bible in the church assumed a close relationship between the biblical text, its inspired author or authors, and readers. When one read the book of Isaiah, for example, one heard the words of the prophet and through his words, the Word of God. One's faith context was also seen as important. Christians believed that reading Isaiah within the context of their faith enabled them to see the deeper, Christian, meaning of the book. Inspired New Testament authors operated in this context and the church and its theologians sought to follow their lead.

But contexts can change, and the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods in Europe led to a heightened awareness of the difference between the 'present world' and the ancient or classical world. One needed to reconstruct its context and ways of communicating in order to understand it. This in turn led many to the conviction that layers of interpretation over the centuries had obscured the original, real, meaning of the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The new critical analysis set out to recover the original meaning of each book of the Bible and through this the thinking of each author. Paradoxically however, this analysis concluded that many books of the Bible had multiple authors and editors and had undergone a long gestation. One could no longer be sure which parts of Isaiah came from Isaiah and which from later editors or scribes. Historical critical analysis opened up the world of the Bible to the reader and showed how divine inspiration can embrace all phases of a text's production, from the spirit filled prophet, to the community that preserves his or her preaching, to the careful work of a later scribe. But a clear connection

between text and purported author could no longer be assured and critics of the approach accused it of fragmenting the Bible, assigning bits of texts to different authors and editors. Others shifted their attention to analysing biblical books as literary works of art, irrespective of who the author, authors or editors might have been.

The context of readers has changed again more recently with the rise of psychological and social sciences. This development has shifted the focus of attention from the author to the reader, what some call the 'subjective factor'. A lot of energy is now expended studying the dynamic relationship between a text and reader. In a sense this is a positive move because in the end it is the reader who has to say what he or she thinks a text means. The danger of course is that one can replace authorial intention with reader's invention. To try and prevent this, critical analysis insists that one must pay attention to the way the various parts of the text have been arranged—presumably by one or more authors. Even though the traditional relationship between author, text and reader has been pulled apart and dissected by critical analysis, there is now broad agreement that we need to keep their relationship in mind, even though we will probably never get the balance quite right. We are only human beings after all. Wrestling with such issues is part of the adventure of reading and discussing the Bible, or any text for that matter. We can learn from different perspectives, differing contexts.

It is a risky business to try and identify key theological themes in the rich and varied books that make up the Bible but life is about risks so here is an attempt. A key theme is love; primarily God's unconditional love of us and, as a result of this, our love of God, neighbour and ourselves. God hates the evil we do but loves us despite our evildoing. The biblical meaning of love emphasises loyalty and commitment. According to the Bible's claim, Israel is the chosen people to mediate God's love to the world; according to Christian faith, this divine love is most intensely and perfectly enshrined in the figure of Jesus. How is God's love revealed? Primarily, so the Bible claims, through justice and mercy/kindness. It is important to remember that the Bible explores these key terms within a context of injustice and cruelty. Augustine once said: 'love and do what you will'. If we really did love we would will to do what the lover (God) wants. But because we are flawed and sinful creatures we need to learn to love by being just and merciful. A theology of God as just means that God is intolerant of evil and acts to remove it and establish a just society or world. But God's

justice is always kind and merciful, what is best for humanity. To use another biblical term, it is about salvation.

The great challenge for biblical people, as for ourselves, was to assess their experience/history in relation to justice and mercy, both on the individual, national an international scale (God is Lord of all history). Prophets intervened at times to challenge Israel about its conduct and proclaim that God would punish it for its infidelity to the covenant established at Sinai (book of Exodus). If prophets did not proclaim this message the theology of a just and merciful God would lose its authority. Punishment did not mean the covenant relationship was ended. God remained committed to Israel and would in due course restore it to the land and enable it to live as a just society, a beacon for all the nations of the world. This is a broad theological schema that makes a faith claim, it cannot be proved nor does it try to answer all the particular issues and questions that arise for each individual or each generation. This is not the Bible's purpose. Rather, it offers a 'big picture' or framework within which we are challenged to make decisions about our lives.

Christians believe that Jesus is the one sent by God, the only Son, to fulfil Israel's mission to the world. He showed his complete and unconditional commitment to bring justice and mercy to our sinful world by his death on the cross. But Jesus' death was not just a heroic act of self-sacrifice, of giving his life out of love for us. As his resurrection revealed, it is a passage to a new and everlasting life that he invites us to share even now through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a grace or power that enables us to live a life of love and to build a just and merciful society

Another important theme that courses through the Bible is what I would call the distorted perception of reality. The Bible virtually begins with it in the Garden Story. This seemingly simple story tackles a key challenge that all human beings face: to accept being a creature rather than try to become the creator. God instructs the couple that they may eat any tree but one. All relationships operate within appropriate boundaries or frameworks and within the story this instruction establishes the appropriate boundary. The temptation is to cross it on our terms (eat the fruit of the tree) in the belief that we will then be in control (you will be like God). This is the dream of the modern consumer: unlimited supply that will satisfy any demand. The irony is that the couple end up erecting all kinds of barriers between themselves (hiding their nakedness behind fig leaves) and God (hiding from God among the trees). Same God and same couple, but what was seen beforehand as good (God, themselves) is now

seen as evil and to be feared. This distorted perception occurs in the Gospels where one group who see Jesus heal someone proclaim it as a work of God, whereas another group, seeing the same thing, claim it is a work of the devil. With such a distorted perception of reality, how can human beings establish true justice and mercy? But God is good and loyal and comes to restore our true perception of things, and so we have the story of Israel culminating in the figure of Jesus. In a definitive response to the serpent's bogus claim 'eat this and you will be like God' Jesus proclaims 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life'. In an echo of Gen 1:26, we will finally be remade in the image and likeness of our just and merciful God.

Hopefully, these few introductory remarks and the reflections that follow will be of some use to readers who celebrate the Lord's day, whether as preachers in the liturgy who need to prepare a homily, or worshippers in our churches who listen to the readings. They may also be of some use to any who are curious about what the Bible has to say to our world.

IntroductiontotheGos pelof M atthew(f or Year A)

It may be useful for readers at this point to have a brief introduction to the Gospel according to Matthew. Each of the four gospels provides a somewhat different (and limited) angle on Jesus; human beings, even inspired ones, cannot say everything that could be said about Jesus (cf the remark in John 21:25).[1] Matthew, like Luke but unlike Mark and John, commences with an account of Jesus' birth, follows this with an account of his public ministry mainly in Galilee, and concludes with his death and resurrection. A significant feature of Matthew's understanding of Jesus is that he is the one who fulfils Old Testament prophecies and whose teaching completes the Torah or law (cf Jesus' remark on Torah/law and prophecy in 5:17, part of the 'sermon on the mount'). You will find that Matthew's Gospel provides frequent references to prophetic and law texts, and debates with Jewish authorities about their meaning. The claim of Matthew's Gospel is that Jesus does not come to abolish the Torah but to fulfil it. The mystery of God is always unfolding its meaning in our world, a claim that is also made by the Old Testament. Important Old Testament titles such as Son of Man, Messiah/Christ, Son of David and Son of God are applied to Jesus and thereby assume a deeper meaning. While each title reveals something about his identity he transcends them all.

Matthew, and the other Gospels as well, never separate the person of Jesus from his teaching. His whole life—words and actions—proclaim his identity and mission to replace the false kingdom of Satan with the 'kingdom of heaven'. The most visible sign of its presence is of course Jesus himself, and the foundational church community that gathers around

1. Even more so this brief introduction. For further reading, Brendan Byrne's book on Matthew in the bibliography is recommended.

him. Another important, and difficult, aspect of Matthew's account is that the revelation of God's purpose in the figure of Jesus triggers hostility and rejection, in particular among Jewish authorities. As this grows, Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus instructing his disciples about the nature of the kingdom (cf in particular the prominence of parables from chapter 13 on) and warning them of his impending death. Contemporary scholarship holds that the Gospel was written in the late first century CE and may well reflect not only Jesus' own experience but also the deepening rift between Judaism and early Christianity. Hostility is signalled early in Matthew's infancy narrative (Herod's massacre of the children) and reaches its climax in the plot to kill Jesus when he enters the holy city Jerusalem and preaches authoritatively in the temple. In a last supper with the disciples, he provides them with the gift of himself in the eucharistic bread and wine before suffering a violent and humiliating death. While those who regard themselves as insiders (chief priests, scribes, elders) mock the one who has been finally 'eliminated', those who are regarded as outsiders (the centurion and his squad) profess 'Truly this man was God's Son'. This serves as another signal in the Gospel for what is to come. In the final scene (28:16–20), the now resurrected Son of God entrusts his universal mission to the disciples—the embryonic church. The ones who had themselves rejected and abandoned him to a man are still the chosen and trusted ones; an assurance that reconciliation and healing are offered to all no matter how distant they may see themselves, or how others may see them, in relation to Jesus.





FirstSunda yof Advent

Isaiah 2:15; Romans 13:1144; Matthew 24:3744

As we begin a new liturgical year the church gives us a gospel that talks about the end, or at least the end of this earthly age. This may initially appear a little surprising but there is a reason for it: if we reflect on the end of things a bit we may be better prepared to launch into the new liturgical year and be more confident about the future. In other words it is likely there is more to this talk about our end than initially meets the eye and our readings should help us see something of it.

Jesus likening himself to a burglar provides a good starting point; if you offered people a selection of images of Jesus I doubt whether this one would be a favourite. Yet it makes two important points. The first is that there is no point trying to keep this burglar out of your 'house'; he is quite unlike any other burglar and can break in at any time, anywhere. So you might as well accept this and get a good night's sleep. Stop worrying. Why then the injunction to 'stay awake'? Again I think there is more here than initially meets the eye. The gospel passage begins with Jesus saying that the Son of Man is surely coming to bring God's purpose to an end or completion even though people may never give it a thought or reject it altogether. The great flood came because it was part of God's purpose irrespective of what people thought and, according to Jesus' version of it, most had no idea or couldn't give a toss. Furthermore, when Jesus comes it will be with a definite purpose, although to the unknowing or uncaring eye it will look like sheer chance, no apparent reason why 'of two men in the fields one is taken, one left'.

Within this context the injunction to 'stay awake' does not mean all night vigils. Rather, it means we should take care to keep two important things in mind. The first is that even though it may not look like it from a human perspective, God is bringing the divine purpose for creation to its

completion in God's good time. This should fuel hope. The second thing is that God knows exactly how and where we fit in and play our role in advancing the divine purpose (life is not chance or chaos). This should fuel faith. It also allows a second point to be made about Jesus as burglar. Unlike the common or garden variety prowling our suburbs, Jesus breaks into our 'houses' only for our good, not to rob or take away but to give, not to kill but to bestow life, not to instil fear but to tell us not to be afraid and to assure us that we are all invited to share in the kingdom of his father, our true home. Jesus will even invade the houses of those who most fear him and want to keep him as far away as possible, hoping that his words may convince them to change their lives.