Sunday Matters

Reflections on the Lectionary Readings For Year C

Mark A O'Brien OP



SUNDAY MATTERS

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Mark A O'Brien OP



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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 800 words) so that all the Sundays and major feasts of a liturgical year can be included in one book. As a result not every reading can be given equal attention. This volume covers year C of the Roman Catholic Lectionary; previous volumes covered years A and B.

These reflections originally appeared in the *Australasian Catholic Record* over a 3–year period as 'Reflections on the Readings of Sundays and Feasts' (2007–9).[1] Although not homilies they were composed with homiletic preparation in mind. In the light of readers' comments and further reflection, some have been revised, others rewritten and new ones added

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.

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

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.

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 our selves, 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 Genesis 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.



Introduction to the Gospel of Luke (for Year C)

In contrast to the other Evangelists Luke wrote a two–volume work, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. The first tells the story of Jesus' life and ministry, the second that of the fledgling church community that he founded. One of Luke's aims is to show how the life and ministry of Jesus transforms our understanding of time and place, thereby giving authentic meaning and purpose to human life. He presents Jesus as the one who inaugurates the definitive or final era of God's saving purpose for the world; he fulfils the promises of the Old Testament. In doing so Jesus also, according to Luke, transforms or 'fills up' their meaning; they are understood in a new light. Jesus also transforms our perception of place. The account of his birth (Luke 2) commences with a decree from the Roman Emperor to number the 'whole world'. It affects a seemingly insignificant couple on the margins of the Roman world, Mary and Joseph. Luke's two–volume work concludes with a reversal of this scenario: Paul, a prisoner within the Roman world, arrives at its centre with Jesus' decree—the Good News of the Gospel—inviting all to join the one community that matters, the 'kingdom of God'. Caesar's decree is about information and control mechanisms (a census); Jesus' decree is about freedom from such controls and the formation of right relationships.

We understand a whole via its parts, hence, in order to gain some appreciation of the Gospel it is worth identifying its constituent parts. To do this I will make use of the work of recent commentators.[3] Most modern divisions do not follow the Gospel chapters and verses at all points. These were made in medieval Europe and are retained in current editions because of established custom. Understandably however, modern perceptions of where parts begin and end have changed to some extent and will

3. See for example Brendan Byrne SJ, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Strathfield: St Pauls Publications, 2000) and the literature cited there.

probably change again. As readers become more familiar with the text they can make their own judgements.

The introduction or prologue in 1:1–4 is followed in 1:5 – 2:52 by what is commonly called the 'Infancy Narrative', in fact the infancy narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus. The birth of each child is announced in advance by the angel Gabriel (the annunciation scenes) and is followed by an account of the birth, circumcision and naming of each child. The circumcision/naming ceremony of each is accompanied by a prophecy; in the case of John it is the famous 'Benedictus' of his father Zechariah (1:67–79; in the case of Jesus it is the prophecies about Jesus and Mary by Simeon (2:25–32) and Anna (2:36–38).This pairing of infancy narratives allows Luke to spell out the close relationship between the roles that John the Baptist and Jesus are to play in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation but also to highlight their difference.

The 'annunciation' about John's birth and his father's prophecy are firmly focused on the advent of Jesus for whom John is to prepare the people. The unique status of Jesus is further emphasised in Mary's song (the Magnificat), in the narrative of his birth and in the 'Finding in the temple' that concludes this section of the Gospel. The Infancy Narrative commences with Zechariah in the temple serving God (1:8–10); it ends with Jesus proclaiming to his parents that 'I must be in my Father's house' (2:49), a signal of his unique relationship with God.[4] In light of this it is significant that the Gospel ends with the disciples 'continually in the temple praising God' (24:53). Readers will find that Luke introduces other important themes in the Infancy Narrative that are developed in the course of the Gospel.

The next major section of the Gospel (3:1 – 4:13) portrays both John the Baptist and Jesus in the desert/wilderness. In contrast to Matthew, Luke does not report any encounter between John and Jesus at his baptism (3:21–22). The implication may be that the prophetic vocation is about serving God's purpose not personal satisfaction (of meeting Jesus). John exemplifies the true prophet. After his baptism Jesus is tempted in the wilderness (4:1–13); in contrast to Israel that frequently succumbed to various temptations on its journey through the wilderness (Exodus and Numbers), Jesus demonstrates complete loyalty to God's will (the fulfilment of God's purpose). He exemplifies what it is to be a 'son of God' (cf the genealogy that precedes the temptation narrative).

4. The Greek expression here can also mean 'my Father's affairs' (cf Jerusalem Bible).

Jesus' return from his wilderness sojourn inaugurates what can be called his 'Galilean ministry', a portion of the Gospel that runs from 4:14 to 9:50. It unfolds in several stages. Jesus first proclaims the 'Good News' in his hometown of Nazareth (4:14–30) where initial amazement turns to hostility and an attempt to kill him when he challenges their understanding of who he is. This adumbrates a theme that will develop in the course of the Gospel and reach its fulfillment in Jesus' passion and death. Rejected by his own townsfolk, Jesus goes to Capernaum and other towns proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of God and providing signs of its presence with a number of cures (4:14 – 5:16). In the middle of this section one finds the call of the first disciples (5:1–11). Jesus summons four fishermen from the 'crowd pressing round him' to become fishers of men.

Here one finds in embryonic form another important theme that Luke develops—Jesus and the Holy Spirit's transformation of the disparate and desperate 'crowds', Jews and Gentiles, into the 'people/community of God'. Within this covenant relationship with God all other relationships can find their proper place and purpose. The section 5:17 – 6:11 has a similar arrangement; accounts of Jesus' cures frame the call of another disciple, Levi (Matthew). However, in contrast to the earlier sequence this one brings to the fore for the first time the hostility of the scribes and Pharisees. Debate ensues about the right (lawful) way to keep the Sabbath, the day of rest and healing, and the section concludes with the report that 'they began to discuss the best way of dealing with Jesus'.

Jesus counters this hostile group by expanding his own community of disciples to twelve (6:12–16) and openly instructing them and the crowd about the nature of the 'kingdom of God' (6:17–49). This is Luke's parallel to Matthew's 'sermon on the mount' and commences with a version of the Beatitudes that echoes the radical reversal of the established order proclaimed in Mary's 'Magnificat'. It is followed by further accounts of Jesus' healing ministry (7:1–50), in the midst of which there is the delegation from John the Baptist. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, John does not seek to gain advantage or personal satisfaction, only the truth about Jesus. For this Jesus commends him (7:18–30).

The report of women disciples joining Jesus' band in 8:1–3 could be read as concluding this section or introducing the last part of Jesus' Galilean ministry (8:4 – 9:50). This includes the first mission of the twelve (9:1–11), the meal for the multitude (9:12–17), and Peter's answer to Jesus' question about his identity (9:18–21). The transfiguration scene fol-

lows which provides further revelation of Jesus' identity and mission. But this climactic scene is framed by the first prophecies of Jesus' passion (cf 9:22, 44–45), the significance of which is hidden from the disciples, and instructions about the nature and cost of discipleship (9:23–26, 46–50). Thus Luke concludes his account of the Galilean ministry on a sombre note.

Most modern commentators identify a major turning point in Luke's Gospel at 9:51, which states 'Now as the time drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, he resolutely took the road for Jerusalem'. The account of this journey runs from 9:51 to 19:27 and contains material that Luke and Matthew share as well as material peculiar to Luke.[5]

The section commences on an ominous note; a Samaritan village spurns Jesus but he refuses to take revenge on those who reject him (9:51–56), a foreshadowing of what will take place in Jerusalem? Nevertheless, the successful mission of the seventy two disciples (or seventy) that follows in 10:1–20 provides assurance for all disciples that God's saving purpose will ultimately triumph despite rejection. The mission of the disciples also signals why the bulk of Luke's account of Jesus' journey is taken up with instruction of various kinds rather than healings and exorcisms (there are only 4 and each provides an occasion or opportunity for further instruction; cf 11:14; 13:10–13; 14:1; 17:11–19). Via parables, instructions, and debates with adversaries, Luke portrays Jesus expounding on the nature of the Christian community and how it is to undertake the 'journey' of living and preaching the Gospel.

In order to become an effective disciple, a 'good Samaritan', Martha needs first of all to be instructed by the Teacher. In this sense her sister Mary has chosen 'the better part' (10:29–42). In his account of the Galilean ministry Luke often portrays Jesus at prayer; hence instructions on prayer and its importance (cf the 'Lord's Prayer') are to be an integral part of the disciple's life (11:1–13). A text that encapsulates the theology of this part of the Gospel is the parable of the 'prodigal son' in 15:11–32, found only in Luke. As Eduard Schweizer points out, the customary title of this parable is something of a misnomer.[6] The central figure is the father who loves equally his prodigal yet repentant younger son and his hostile elder

5. The material or tradition common to Luke and Matthew is known as the Q source, because the theory that they drew on a common source was first proposed by German scholars and the German word for source is Quelle.
6. Eduard Schweizer, *Luke. A Challenge to Present Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 78–81.