

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.37 No.30

The First Sunday after Trinity

06/18/06

RELEVANCE TO ETERNITY (Part II)

LAST week I wrote about the critical practical importance of the Christian year to Christians: that the observance of the Christ-centered annual cycle of feast and fast, of day, week, and season, preserves us from being entirely absorbed into a purely worldly outlook, and keeps alive in us an awareness of our eternal destiny, so that we may indeed desire and confidently hope "so to pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal". In the practical observance of the Christian year, we make our time relevant to eternity.

And I wrote briefly about the historical origins of the Christian year in the ancient Church. Along with the Bible, the Creeds, and the doctrinal definitions of the Councils, the Church year is part of a Christian's fundamental inheritance from the early Church, to be received and handed on unimpaired to our posterity. This week I should like to add something about the pattern of lessons (called a lectionary) from Scripture for use on Sundays and other holy days, in which the meaning of the Church year is expressed.

As the Church year began to develop in the early centuries, certain days acquired certain lessons, psalms, and prayers "proper" to that occasion (we still call such appointed lessons and prayers "the propers" of the day). On days like Easter and Christmas, the choice of propers is rather obvious, and seems to have been fixed relatively early. But gradually, mainly from the 4th to 6th century, every holy day was provided with its own propers; and various churches devised their own lectionaries to accomplish this.

The lectionary developed in the city of Rome in this period was brought across the Alps in the 7th and 8th centuries, and was eventually adopted throughout most of western Europe, as well as by the English church. It remained in use right up to the 16th century Reformation. This is almost exactly the same cycle of epistles and gospels which Thomas Cranmer retained in the first English Prayer book of 1549 and which appears largely unchanged in the American Prayer book of 1928. (It was also retained at the Reformation by the Lutheran churches, with the serendipitous result that Bach's sacred cantatas fit perfectly with the Book of Common Prayer.) On most Sundays and holy days, what we read in the Prayer Book provision of epistle and gospel lessons has been read by our Christian forbears here and in western Europe for approaching fifteen hundred years. And those who ponder these lessons patiently and humbly, seeking to discern the logic behind their choice and arrangement, find them to compose a system subtle,

profound, and comprehensive in its treatment of the essentials of the spiritual life. That should be no surprise: the theological, liturgical, and spiritual achievement of the ancient Church in which it developed was immense, and only modern arrogance takes for granted or dismisses it.

So it is one of the ironies of recent liturgical revision, which often claims to be returning to the original patterns of worship in the early church, that an actual ancient lectionary (as found in the Prayer Book, as well as in Lutheran and Roman service books) was largely dismantled in favour of a purely hypothetical antiquarian reconstruction. The modern church discarded a lectionary actually devised by the ancient Church in favor of a lectionary it thinks they should have devised.

The most common of these new lectionaries, adopted in the 1979 Prayer book, is known as the Common Lectionary. It provides three lessons plus a selection of psalmody for the principal service on each Sunday and holy day for a three year cycle. (Our older lectionary for the principal service on Sundays and holy days provides two lessons over a one year cycle.) Therefore the Common Lectionary usually is presented as a self-evident change for the better, one that preserves the pattern of the Church year while providing a more extensive reading of Scripture. Careful analysis of this claim, however, demonstrates that "it ain't necessarily so". More is not necessarily better. In attempting to do two things at once – preserving the Church year and reading Scripture more fully – the Common Lectionary often falls between two stools.

On one hand, the Church year is mutilated (Septuagesima disappears), and its character is diluted. Both the season after Epiphany together with what used to be Septuagesima, and the season after Trinity, lose their character and become simply "ordinary time"; while the logic behind the lessons for "special seasons" often seems rather superficial. On the other hand, despite much ingenuity, the Common Lectionary falls short of its goal of providing a fuller, more continuous reading of the books of Scripture. For instance, in the sequential reading of the Epistle to the Romans, the momentous first chapter, without which you cannot grasp Paul's line of thought in the rest of the epistle, is (except for a mere snippet) conspicuous by its absence. Other books are read only in an unsystematic kind of way. And attempts to remedy these weaknesses in the Revised Common Lectionary (already itself subject to further revision) only further exacerbate the problem. For the greater part of the Church year – "ordinary time" – the three lessons for each Sunday in the RCL have no relation to one another in principle. Where then is the coherence of lessons essential to the Church year? (And the first chapter of Romans is still missing.)

In its own terms, the Common Lectionary fails. When the loss of the ancient lectionary for the Church year is also considered, the failure becomes grievous: another example of an agenda for 'progress' heedlessly making things worse. And none of it was necessary. There are simpler, more effective, and less destructive methods of addressing the perceived problems, already largely worked out in the Prayer Book tradition.

All of this talk about lectionaries may seem of doubtful importance to Father Ralston's "Bible-believing Christians just trying to get along in

an uncertain world". I have no doubt that reading some Scripture is better than reading none, and that there are lots of fine Christians getting along all right with the Common Lectionary or, for that matter, with none. But if we actually cared, as a church, to offer God the best and finest of his own gifts to us, we would not have done what we in fact have done: arrogantly discarded the centuries-long work of his Holy Spirit in the tradition of the Church for the sake of our ingenious and flawed fabrications.

The Rev'd. Gavin G. Dunbar

[send this](#)

[bookmark](#)

[print](#)

[close](#)

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.