The Lectionary and the Liturgical Year:
How Catholics Read Scripture

by Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., S.T.D.

Why would a Catholic who wants to know about the Bible read an article on the liturgical year? The answer is simple: The liturgical year is not primarily about vestment colors, ashes and palms, poinsettias and Easter lilies. The liturgical year is the "official context" in which Catholics hear the Scriptures proclaimed, and this context is important for our understanding of the Bible. Most parts of our country experience nature—s four seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter. I like the variety of the seasons. The amazing abundance and diversity of nature fill me with wonder at the beauty and extravagance of nature—s Creator.

The liturgical year has its seasons also: Advent/Christmas (including Advent, Christmas Day and the feasts of the Christmas season until the Baptism of the Lord) and Lent/Easter (Lent, Easter Sunday and the 50 days until Pentecost). During these seasonal times, we read selections from the Bible that correspond to the great mysteries of our faith.

The mystery of Christ is so rich and diverse that one picture or viewpoint can—to do it justice. While studying liturgy in France during the years following the Second Vatican Council, I came across many beautiful sculptures. I remember how frustrating it was to try to share that beauty with my mother back in Kansas by merely sending her a postcard or a photograph. There was no way a flat picture could capture the beauty of the three-dimensional sculpture. Often the best I could do was to walk around the statue and take pictures from different angles and perspectives and in that way try to capture at least something of the richness of the experience.

The liturgical seasons serve the same purpose in showing the fullness of the mystery of Christ. During the course of a year we experience this mystery from various angles and in different circumstances. In the words of the Second Vatican Council: "Within the cycle of a year, the Church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, from his incarnation and birth until his ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of blessed hope and of the Lord—s return" (Constitution on the Liturgy, #102).

A Reading From...

Hearing the Scriptures at Mass is a different type of experience than studying the Bible privately at home or with a group. When the Scriptures are proclaimed in the liturgy, Christ himself becomes present in a special way. Vatican II—s Constitution on the Liturgy states: “[Christ] is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church” (#7).

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council knew that if they were to fulfill their desire "to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful" (Constitution on the Liturgy, #1), they would have to restore the Bible to its central place in the liturgy and in the lives of Catholics. If we are to follow Christ, we must know Christ;
to know Christ, we must know the Scriptures. As St. Jerome once said, "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."

The Council decreed: "The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly [at the Eucharist], so that a richer share in God—s word may be provided for the faithful" (Constitution on the Liturgy, #51). The "plan" for achieving this goal is contained in a book called the lectionary. As Sunday is "the first holy day of all" and "the foundation and core of the whole liturgical year" (Constitution on the Liturgy, #106), the most important passages of Scripture are presented in the Sunday lectionary. The weekday lectionary complements the Sunday lectionary.

During the course of a year the Scriptures for Mass are selected in one of two ways. During the major seasons of the liturgical year (Lent/Easter and Advent/Christmas), passages are selected because of their "theme," that is, their relation to a particular mystery of our faith. During the remaining Sundays of the year, known as "Ordinary Time," various books of the Bible are read roughly from beginning to end over a number of weeks.

The Second Vatican Council directed that the lectionary be arranged so that the readings were selected over "the course of a prescribed number of years" to allow for "a more representative portion of holy Scripture" to be read at Mass. The Sunday lectionary uses a three-year cycle based on the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke present a "similar view," syn-opsis in Greek). Each year we concentrate on one of these Gospels: Matthew in Cycle A, Mark in Cycle B, Luke in Cycle C. John—s Gospel is featured primarily during the major seasons or to highlight key doctrines such as the Eucharist.

In addition to a Gospel reading, each Sunday Eucharist has two other readings. The first reading is usually taken from the Old Testament and is selected in the light of the theme of the Gospel to be read on that Sunday. The second reading is taken from the letters of Paul or one of the other writings of the New Testament. Like the Gospels, these books are read semi-continuously and are selected so that over the course of the three-year cycle we have a taste of each of the books of the New Testament. For example, during the Sundays of Ordinary Time in Cycle A we read from First Corinthians (for 7 continuous Sundays), Romans (the next 16 Sundays), Philippians (4 Sundays) and First Thessalonians (5 Sundays).

**Celebrating Christ in Our Midst**

Christmas is both the beginning and the end of the Church year. At Christmas we celebrate Christ coming among us in human form at Bethlehem and we turn our attention to the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time. During Advent, the four weeks of joyful and spiritual expectation preceding the feast, the readings from the Bible are selected in the light of this two-fold theme. The readings of the first Sunday concern Christ—s second coming at the end of time. On the second and third Sundays of Advent we read of John the Baptist. During the final days of Advent we read about those events that immediately prepared for the Lord—s birth (the first chapters of Matthew and Luke).

During this season the Old Testament readings are prophecies about the Messiah and messianic times, especially those wonderful and hope-filled passages from the Book of Isaiah: "One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again...." (2:4b); "The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them..." (11:6b).

Sunday is the original and oldest Christian feast. The early Christian communities began to celebrate the Sunday that fell closest to the Jewish Passover with special solemnity. This "Christian Passover" became what we now call Easter. As Easter celebrates Christ—s passage from death to life, the feast soon became the community—s special time for the Sacrament of Baptism, the Christian—s passage from death to life in Christ.

In the fourth and fifth centuries the Church developed a system of rites to accompany the faith journey of those who wished to become Christians. Today these rites have been revived as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). The final 40 days of this journey became what we now call Lent.

Baptism is the key to understanding the selection of Scripture passages read during Lent. For example, the Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent is the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert. Lent is a retreat before baptism. In the Gospel Jesus retreats into the desert to pray. The principal symbol of Baptism is water; the desert causes us to yearn for water. In all four Gospels the temptation stories follow immediately upon the account of Jesus— baptism.
On the second Sunday we hear of the transfiguration and we see Jesus in his Easter clothes. We can imagine those elected for baptism receiving their white garment as they come up from the baptismal pool on Easter.

The readings for Cycle A express the baptism themes particularly well and may be used every year on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent. On the third Sunday in Cycle A, for example, we find Jesus at a well in Samaria where a woman asks for living water. We cannot help but think of the living waters of our baptism.

On the fourth Sunday we read the story of the man who was born blind. As Jesus tells him "Go wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent)" (John 9:7) we remember how we went and washed in Christ, the "one who was sent into this world" for our salvation. We came up from that pool illumined and able to see in a new way.

And on the fifth Sunday, when we hear the story of Lazarus coming forth from the tomb, we think of the newly baptized coming forth from the baptismal tomb released from the bondage of sin.

Our radical transformation by being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ is the focus of the Easter celebration. The Resurrection is the central mystery of our faith. Easter is so important that we cannot even begin to celebrate it adequately in one day—it takes a week, the Easter Octave. And even more, it takes a week of weeks (7 x 7)—50 days, a Pentecost (pent ekonta, Greek for 50). Each day of these Fifty Days is Easter. Notice that we speak of the Sundays of Easter, not the Sundays after Easter. Pentecost is the final day of our celebration of Easter.

During these Fifty Days we look at our Christian roots. Each day at Mass, both Sundays and weekdays, we read from the Acts of the Apostles. The newly baptized have not only "put on Christ," they have put on his Body, the Church, and they (and we) take time during these Fifty Days to remember who that family, that "Church," is. We see the picture of the birth and early growth of our Church in the Acts of the Apostles.

**If Today You Hear God—s Voice**

On Pentecost we read both Luke—s and John—s accounts of the sending of the Holy Spirit. In the first reading we hear Luke—s account of the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11). The Gospel reading presents John—s account of the gift of the Spirit on Easter Sunday (John 20:19-23). We do not need to ask whether the Spirit is given on Pentecost (as in Luke) or on Easter Sunday (as in John); the liturgy is not concerned with merely reading about past events, nor are the Scriptures trying to present literal accounts of these events. The liturgy makes "the work of our redemption a present actuality" (Constitution on the Liturgy, #2). The Holy Spirit is given today, this Pentecost. When we hear the Passion of Christ proclaimed on Good Friday and we sing "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" the answer is, of course, "Yes! I was there! I am there now!" Easter is not merely remembering something that happened two thousand years ago. Christ rises in us today.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that: "Recalling the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of the Lord—s powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present in every age in order that the faithful may lay hold of them and be filled with saving grace" (Constitution on the Liturgy, #102). The liturgy enables us to pass from our "past-present-future" time and to enter into God—s "time of salvation" so that the grace and mystery of the event recalled is made present.

I do not have to feel disappointed that I was "born too late" and all the wonderful events of Christianity happened long ago before my time. The wonderful events of Christianity are happening now. Reading Scripture in the context of the liturgical year proclaims this marvelous truth again and again.

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