

A Lectionary Story – Part Two

The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible

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Having finished your Sunday Bible-reading plan, you now settle down to work out a daily one. You now realise that others have done this sort of work before, so you check out some websites. You discover that until around 1500 there was no particular system in use, mostly because printing had not been invented, so only a few copies of the Bible existed, and only a few people could read anyway. Ordinary people knew the Bible stories from the windows in larger churches, annual dramatic events, and being taught by monks and nuns.

What about the Reformation, with its emphasis on everyone knowing the Bible, you ask? You find a copy of the old Book of Common Prayer, and are pleased to see that – once you got past the introductions – its first section is ‘Tables of Lessons’ (an old name for ‘readings’) for Sundays, Holy Days, and then every day.

Wow – so old-time English Christians heard the Bible every day! And, as you work through the Tables, you realise that they heard a *lot* – a chapter from each Testament morning and night, and half a dozen Psalms as well! Plus pretty much all the Old that mattered, the New twice, the Psalter once each month – and some readings from books you’d not heard of (you later learnt that these were from the Apocrypha). Amazing – but then they did not have radio, telly, newspapers or smartphones to distract them ... It just did not seem practical for your congregation, so you looked at some modern Prayer Books – from Canada, the USA, Papua New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand, the West Indies, Kenya, South Africa, England – “I’d not realised there are so many”, you thought. To your surprise, you found that they used a variety of Bible-reading plans, though all managed to cover the New Testament yearly, most of the Old over two years, and the Psalms every two months or so. A nice compromise with BCP: and as you thought about the quite different seasons, social systems and customs each Prayer Book represented, you came to realise that there were a lot of ‘right’ ways to read the Bible.

Then it struck you: “I’ve been planning for individuals reading their Bible on their own, trying to find a thought for the day.” What would it be like for a small group to hear the scriptures read to them, rather than each read them alone? Which was, you now realise, the way most ‘old-time’ Christians encountered the Bible: it was the only way they could!

So you try an experiment. You got some groups to agree to hear together the scriptures read daily for a week or two, as part of sharing Morning or Evening Prayer – an early breakfast in a coffee shop, at the start of the work day with your parish priest, a lunch group of retirees, and at dinner-time at home with your family.



Speaking with group members a month later, you discovered that people had started to open up and respond much more realistically to the readings. A wry comment about some odd story, a laugh over 'now THAT wouldn't work today!', the occasional profound silence, intercessions arising from what had been heard ... The scriptures had become real: yes, ancient texts from a variety of places and circumstances quite different to yours, but no longer needing to be defended, 'devotioned' or explained away .. but just heard, encouraging conversation about how God and your worlds intersect.

Some questions for discussion:

- (1) What pattern(s) of daily (or reasonably regular) scripture reading do you engage in? What is most helpful about it? What parts of scripture do you find embarrassing / confusing / boring / inexplicable?
- (2) If you have experienced both individual reading and group hearing, what differences in your response have you noticed?
- (3) Your part of the Anglican Communion will have at least one reading plan for daily use (typically one for Morning & Evening Prayer, and another for Holy Communion). It may be in your Prayer Book, or issued as a separate booklet. Explore the way it sets out a pattern for daily reading: what principles do you think guided those who constructed it?
- (4) In the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), read 'Concerning the Service of the Church' at the front. What does it say about the difference between 'reading' and 'hearing'? How have the cultural changes since then changed the way we approach these actions today – especially in an age of electronic media?

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