

Session 7: Using the Lectionary

General Intro: Welcome to the seventh of Eastern Synod's mini-sessions on leading worship. My name is Lindsey, I am the Synod's Mission and Training Officer, and in this session I will be talking about using the lectionary when we lead worship.

What is it?

So you're leading worship next week, and you're looking for a theme for your service. Unless there's an obvious reason why not, I always start with the Lectionary.

The Revised Common Lectionary offers a three-year cycle, with four readings for every Sunday in the Church Year.

This Lectionary has its roots in the Roman Catholic Ordo Lectionum Missae of 1969. In the 1970s, several Protestant denominations began creating their own. The Common Lectionary, a collaborative, ecumenical project, was published in 1983, and it was followed by The Revised Common Lectionary in 1992.

The four readings are a Lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures (or Acts during the Season of Easter), a Psalm, a Lesson from the Letters or Acts and a Lesson from the Gospels

Why use it? There are downsides to the Lectionary: there are those who feel restricted by a set of prescribed readings. You may feel led or called to your own choice of text, or equally you may feel that the readings have nothing to say to you when you first read them. Sometimes you may feel that they are simply too challenging or difficult for a particular time or congregation (I'll come back to this later). I see many upsides to using the Lectionary, however. As the writer Sam Hargraves says "The Lectionary is tied to the Church calendar. This takes us on an annual trip from anticipating and celebrating the birth of Christ (through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany), and then the journey up to the cross and onwards from the resurrection (Lent and Easter, and up to Pentecost). In this sense the key aspects of the story of Jesus are emphasised, which can be a helpful way to 'keep the main thing the main thing'. Other important themes are also highlighted with special weeks (for example Trinity Sunday and the Ascension). People are rediscovering the value of this journey, with its different moods and emphases (fasting and feasting, inward and outward looking, times for different approaches to music and art, and more)."¹ It offers a breadth from across the Bible, when one might naturally focus simply on the gospels, for example. It keeps us connected to the Psalms. It can also provide continuity for the congregation when so few churches have the same minister every Sunday. The Hebrew Bible readings and the Gospel readings are at least semi-continuous most of the time, which means that a service one Sunday can lead on in both a narrative and thematic sense from the Sunday before, and to the next Sunday, without coordination between worship leaders. Additionally we become connected to our Christian friends in other churches, to broadcast services, and all sorts of devotional material during the week, many of whom and much of which follows the Lectionary. Nicola will no doubt remind us in Session 8 that a great deal of children's resources also connect in to the Lectionary Cycle.

¹ <https://engageworship.org/articles/why-and-how-use-the-lectionary-worship>

Even if I do have the church's or my own subject in mind, I generally also look at the lectionary readings for that week: they so often have a way of tying in, and can offer a fresh perspective on what has been on your mind.

Where can I find it?

The Lectionary is available online on many sites. My favourite is the Vanderbilt Divinity Library site because it is clear, you have all the readings – including alternatives – available at one click, and there are also suggestions for hymns, copyright-free artwork and other resources. There are also hard copies available from a range of sources, including from the Church of England and the Church of Scotland as illustrated here.

How do I start?

You may be using the lectionary with the intention of writing a sermon. You may not: many local worship leaders do not feel equipped to write a traditional 20 minute sermon. In either case your service -in our tradition- will be rooted in scripture. You will almost certainly go on to choose hymns that tie in to the Bible readings, and prayers that connect with them. The passages will be read, and responded to in some way or another: some leaders will do so with great theological understanding and depth; others may encourage an interactive response; others may reflect briefly after each reading.

As with all aspects of your service, start with prayer before you read the passages for the week. Pray to be open to the Spirit speaking to you through God's word. Read them all, regardless of how many you are planning to include in the service. Highlight key words and themes that connect the four readings and then choose which readings you are going to use. I often use all four, especially if the Psalm seems appropriate to use as a Call to Worship, or there's a hymn based on it, and you can of course quote from or refer to readings that you're not using in full in your service. It is good to read them through well in advance, make a note somewhere to remind yourself what each is about, and then let them sit with you for a bit before doing any more: this can be an hour or two, or a few days, or even weeks. Something may happen in your own life, or in the church's life, or in the wider world that seems different to you in the context of one of the readings; a link between the readings may become apparent; a word or phrase may take on special significance.

An example

This slide shows an example of the Lectionary readings for a particular week. There is usually also an alternative pair of Old Testament and Psalm readings given. The first thing to do is to read each passage, and make a brief note to remind yourself of the broad content. For example in the passage from Genesis...

- READINGS FOR THE COMING WEEK **Proper 6 (11) (June 14, 2020)**
- First reading and Psalm
 - Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7) Sarah is promised a child; promise fulfilled
 - Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 Thanksgiving, and dedication of life to God
- Second reading
 - Romans 5:1-8 Justification through faith; peace hope and grace
- Gospel
 - Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23) Jesus sends out his disciples to the Jewish villages

Your response

“Deep engagement with Scripture and the empowerment of all people to read and understand its texts is core to the Reformed Christian tradition”². Our services centre on scripture; they are rooted in it. How we engage with and respond to the texts varies widely, however. And obviously we will all plan things differently. I like one large sheet of paper and then to mind map everything onto one place, using circles and arrows and asterisks and highlighter pens... others make lists, others write in full prose sentences, others keep it all in their head: however you present it to yourself while preparing, you will probably start thinking about the following things. They will each emerge as more or less important to your message as that begins to take shape.

You may start to see connections between one or more of the readings. In our example -for example- Abraham can't do enough for his angelic visitors, he goes above and beyond for them. Then in the reading from Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples to go to the villages with nothing, and to stay where they are made welcome and provided for and listened to, and to leave where they are not. The perspective is different: the disciples are now the messengers, but as we have seen in Abraham's story how God's promises are kept for those who are faithful, so this thread continues in Matthew. As well as looking for the connections, you may well start asking yourself questions about the *context* of each reading: what has happened just before this? what happens next? what about the political / social / Jewish context of the story? Also, is there any significance to the *location*? What can you find out about it that might add something significant? What about the *language* used: Can you identify where language affects the emphasis of the passage? Are certain key words repeated; do particular verbs or adjectives give the passage a particular energy or tone; What do different translations bring to the passage? do any of the words seem to have been problematic from a translator's point of view? What *people* have a role in this passage and what do we know about their whole journey, from elsewhere in the Bible? You may begin extensive research on any of these elements. The point, however, is not to come up with a fascinating history or anthropological lecture: the point of course is to allow the Spirit to reveal a truth about God, to enable a moment of revelation or transformation in those participating that encourages and inspires them as they start their new week. That enables them to develop their relationship with God.

We are not, of course, attempting to teach sermon-writing in this very short session, merely having a think about some of the things that might inspire or prompt you as you approach and respond to the Lectionary readings.

Paul will talk more about using the bible in worship in Session 9

Substituting the talk / reflection?

As already mentioned, there are ways of engaging with scripture that don't necessitate a sermon. You could simply highlight to the congregation what you consider to be the key points of the reading(s) you have chosen, and connect the elements of your service to them. You could find pictures to accompany the readings and / or their themes, print or project them, and ask the congregation a series of questions, either rhetorically, giving them time to reflect on their thoughts, or literally, to discuss with the person next to them. Having identified your theme, you could find a reflection written by someone else that ties in with the theme, either online or from a wealth of printed resources that are available. You could ask one or more people in the congregation to each give a short testimony that ties in with the theme: of course make sure you ask them in advance, give them some parameters, and tell them how long you'd like them to speak. This could also be done more interactively, as a prepared Q&A.

² From the URC website, <https://urc.org.uk/bible-worship>

There will of course be much more on ways of using the Bible in worship from Nicola and Paul , in Sessions 8 and 9.

Don't avoid the difficulties

One of the perceived challenges of using the lectionary is that as you are not choosing the readings you may not like one or more of them. They may be 'hard', opaque, the tone may feel wrong for you to tackle with an unfamiliar congregation (or with a congregation where you know everyone well, and it may seem inappropriate). We can shy away, for example, from the Genesis passage about Sarah's laughter at the blessing of a child in old age when we know of members of the congregation who had yearned for children but never had them.

But If you want to plan worship that reflects all of God's inspired Word you can't ignore the psalms of lament, struggle, and despair. Neither can you skip all the biblical passages about God's commandments and our difficulty keeping them. Or even some of Paul's seemingly harsh words about behaviour in the churches he wrote to. Holistic worship means bringing " all of ourselves to worship: old and young, body and soul, brain and heart, doubt and belief, lament and joy." Be honest about the difficulties of passages, as you and others may see them. Acknowledge the challenges. We have a deep and holy tradition of wrestling with scripture, while also honouring it.

Alternatives

You may of course still want to avoid the lectionary this week, or any other. That's fine. There are lots of other ways into the Bible for worship, and lots of other resources available. The Joint Public Issues Team, for example, produce a Calendar every year with key dates for a wide range of social justice issues, which also includes worship resources to support you. This slide shows an extract. Some people like to work through a series, such as Holy Habits for example, which has a large range of resources associated with it. You and or your church may have your own agenda to follow. Nicola and Paul will of course discuss further ways of using the Bible in the next two sessions.

We'll end this session with a couple of voices using social media to comment on what using the lectionary has meant to them: