

Revised Common Lectionary Trial

Starting Trinity Sunday, June 11, we will begin experimenting with the Revised Common Lectionary. The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of weekly lections, much like our current three-year lectionary. The primary difference is this: in our current system, the Old Testament lesson is chosen to echo a theme found in the gospel passage that day. For example, let's consider the readings for June 18 this year (Proper 6):

Book of Common Prayer	Revised Common Lectionary
Ezekiel 31:1-6,10-14	1 Samuel 14:34-16:13
Mark 4:26-34	Mark 4:26-34

While the gospel passages are identical (the parable of the mustard seed), the Old Testament lessons are quite different. The prayer book assigns a passage from the Prophet Ezekiel, apparently because it speaks of “birds of the air,” which relates to the birds who make their nest in the mustard bush described in Mark's gospel. Seems a silly reason to choose a passage of scripture, doesn't it?

In all fairness, not all of the pairings are as strained as this particular one, but the overall result is that we subordinate the Old Testament to the New Testament. Now, isn't that just fine for Christians, you ask? While it is true that we privilege the New Testament in general—and the gospels in particular—it is also true that the Old Testament has an integrity of its own. This is the Scripture that Jesus new, and loved, and taught. Why can't we read it more like he did instead, of finding bits and pieces that relate to the gospel of the day?

That's the whole idea of the R.C.L., which for this Sunday has assigned Samuel's anointing of David as king—a story well worth hearing in its own right. Plus, on subsequent Sundays we will have further installments from great epic tale: battle with the Philistines, the sad fate of Uriah the Hittite, and the murder of Absalom, among them. It's a whole new reason to come to church!

Another point in favor of the R.C.L. is its growing ecumenical acceptance. Like the Common Lectionary that preceded it, the Revised Common Lectionary resulted from a consultation of numerous denominations in the United States and Canada—everyone from Free Methodists in Canada to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the U.S. Anglicans as well as the Roman Catholics were well represented on what was known as the “Consultation on Common Texts” that produced the R.C.L.

The Episcopal Church is “behind the curve” in adopting the R.C.L., mostly because our current lectionary tables are published within the covers of our prayer book. Since the R.C.L. is readily available online, however, this is hardly a problem any more.

It is my hope that we will all benefit from hearing the story of the Patriarchs and the Exodus in Year A, the monarchial narratives in Year B, and readings from the Prophets in Year C. At the end of this trial period, we can assess the effectiveness of this change and discern whether to continue use of the Revised Common Lectionary indefinitely.

—Father Barrie