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# PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

*JANUARY—APRIL*

*From the Feast of the Epiphany to the Sixth Sunday of Easter of Year A*

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## PART ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE READINGS

The following is a brief overview of the readings of the Liturgy of the Word for major celebrations proclaimed while this issue of *Compass* is current. It focuses on the readings for Sundays between January and April 2008, from the Feast of the Epiphany to the Sixth Sunday of Easter of Year A. Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

**1. The First readings** before Easter are important opportunities to celebrate the sacred story of Israel's relationship with God as witnessed through its Scriptures. There is no need to 'Christianise' them. They were the Bible readings which Jesus himself would have listened to. The First Testament readings in February and March during Lent are chosen to illustrate and reflect upon some of the most important religious stories and moments that formed God's people: The mythological story that deals with the cause of evil (Lent 1), the call of Abram (Lent 2), Israel's wandering in the desert (Lent 3), the anointment of King David (Lent 4) and God's promise to bring Israel back from Exile (Lent 5).

In Easter the first readings focus on the story of the early Christian community, as portrayed through Luke in the *Book of Acts*. Each of the selections picks up important stories enabling a Christian community today to reflect on the centrality of the Easter event. This emerges across the Sundays, from when we

consider the style of the Jerusalem Christian community life (Easter 2), to the selection of those called to minister in an ethically diverse Christian community in Jerusalem (Easter 5).

**2. The Second Reading** over Lent allows the community to celebrate essential truths about our relationship with Jesus (Lent 1 and 2), God (Lent 3 and 4), and the Spirit (Lent 5) taken from the Pauline literature. Lent 1, 3 and 5 come from Paul's important letter to the Romans. The other Lent Sundays are letters written by Paul's disciples (2 Tim, Eph). Each of the selections is relevant for the respective Lenten theme celebrated.

• In the Easter Season, the second reading is from 1 Peter, written by one (not the historical Peter) assuming a pastoral role for the Christian churches in Asia Minor, to people experiencing turmoil and confusion in their religious practice. The writer seeks to encourage his addressees and remind them of their baptismal life. Selections from 1 Peter throughout Easter invite us to identify the joy and delight the springs from our Christian faith and how this faith is to be lived, despite difficulties.

**3. The Gospel readings** during the Lenten period are either from Matthew (a Jewish-Christian gospel written in the late first century) or from John's gospel (composed in the late first and early second centuries to diversify community with a rich religious history).

• Lent 1 and 2 conventionally look at the stories of Jesus' temptation and transfiguration. In both stories in Mt, Jesus is portrayed as a faithful Jew, committed to God in the midst of temptation and struggle. The highlight of Mt's gospel proclamation comes on Passion Sunday and Easter, with the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. Jesus dies as king, and God raises him to life.

• Lent 3-5 pick up John's Gospel and stories that enable us to reflect on the journey of faith. These readings, each year, raise the key themes and questions of our Christian lives:

For what do we thirst? (The woman at the well) What drives and enlightens us? (The man born blind) What gives us life? (The story of Lazarus). These gospel themes are particularly pertinent to those candidates journeying through Lent and preparing themselves for full initiation into the Christian community in the Easter vigil.

The Gospel stories in the Easter Season are taken from each of the traditions, and are appropriate to reflect on the centrality of Easter, and the life which the Risen Jesus comes to offer the Christian community.

## PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

**January 6—Epiphany of Jesus:** *Is 60:1-6.* God's light shines on creation and humanity. This makes a difference to how our world is perceived. *Eph 3:2-3, 5-6.* The mystery of God's universal and hospitable love means that share in God's life. *Mt 2:1-12.* The wise follow the stars; their eyes are on the heavens, their ear to the Scriptures and their desire on Jesus. *Theme—Being Enlightened.* At the core of every being is the inner light of God. We affirm our search for God and the way we draw close to God through Jesus. Epiphany is a continuous feast (however unrealised) in the heart of every human being. Can we identify some of the ways this happens today?

**January 13—Baptism of Jesus:** *Is 42:1-4, 6-7* God delights in the Servant, who will bring liberation to the disconsolate. *Acts 10:34-38.* Peter acclaims to a Roman household of Cornelius that Jesus is God's baptised and anointed one. All people, irrespective of background, belong to God. *Mt 3:13-17* Jesus is baptised and declared 'beloved.' *Theme—Being Beloved.* In a world of struggle, this celebration offers an opportunity for the baptised community to remember and celebrate its 'belovedness.' God delights in us. This is an important moment to name who God is for us, and we for God, especially when contrary voices seem to dominate.

**January 20—Ordinary Time 2:** *Is 49:3, 5-6* God's Servant is chosen from before time, with a mission of restoration to a broken and dispersed people. *1 Cor 1:1-3.* The beginning of a famous letter, in which the Corinthian Christians are reminded of their call to sainthood, and their relationship to God and Jesus. *Jn 1:29-34.* John the Baptist recognises Jesus as the chosen one and possessor of God's Spirit. *Theme—Spirit Possessed:* Our communion with Jesus through baptism and Eucharist confirms us as those who are possessed with the Spirit of God. We are called, like the Servant, to proclaim restoration and hope to people

**January 27—Ordinary Time 3:** *Is 9:1-4.* A beautiful poem of God's overwhelming vision for humanity: light, peace and freedom in the midst of oppression. *1 Cor 1:10-13, 17-18.* Paul addresses the problem at Corinth of division. The true source of unity is Jesus, the Good News. *Mt 4:12-23.* Jesus' presence and ministry echoes the *Is* reading of liberation, and the first community of disciples is called. *Theme—Liberation and Hope:* The hope expressed in the vision of Isaiah in the first reading is always desired. Mt's Jesus expresses this as he calls his first disciples. How is this community today an expression of that hope and liberty, of Isaiah's vision?

**February 3—Ordinary Time 4:** *Zep 2: 3; 3:*

12-13. The prophet encourages the people to seek God. In return God will form a truth and sacred people. *1 Cor 1: 26-31*. Those attracted to God are regarded by others as ‘foolish.’ They have a wisdom which is from God. *Mt 5: 1-12a* Jesus teaches the heart of discipleship in this list of attributes that reveal God’s blessedness of people.. *Theme—Openness to God*. Living a life focussed on God permeates membership in the Christian community. This Eucharistic community illustrates how this is tangibly expressed. This is what makes today’s reading relevant.

**February 10—Lent 1:** *Gn 2: 7-9; 3: 1-7*. An ancient story that reflects on the mystery of evil and human’s cooperation with it. Everyone gets blamed! *Rom 5:12-19*. The role of Jesus as God’s obedient and righteous one in the plan for human liberation. This reading is heard in the light of the first reading.. *Mt 4:1-11* Jesus is tempted by the devil and remains faithful to God. *Theme—Evil & Fidelity*. Powerful experiences of suffering and misery are the focus for this first Sun of Lent. The invitation at this start of Lent to repentance and fidelity to God might typify today’s Eucharist.

**February 17—Lent 2:** *Gen 12:1-4*. God calls Abram and the story of Israel begins. *2 Tim 1:8-10*. The writer’s invites us to bring our struggles into communion with Jesus, relying always on God’s power. *Mt 17:1-9*. Jesus is transfigured. *Theme—Change*: Abram and Jesus are both theological models of sacred change. . . .open to God and God’s call. Church renewal invites us to an openness to change and a confidence in the future. Gloom and doom are far from today’s liturgy.

**February 24—Lent 3:** *Ex 17:3-7*. The desert wandering people of Israel’s tribes complain about their thirst *Rom 5:1-2,5-8*. Paul affirms God’s love for us. This becomes the cause of hope. *Jn 4:5-42*. The great story of the woman at the well who meets the source of living water, Jesus. *Theme—Thirst Quenching*: For what do we thirst? What are our deepest desires? for our world? for this community? Our readings invite us to renew our relationship

with the source of Living Water, who can deeply satisfy us.

**March 2—Lent 4:** *1 Sam 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13* The shepherd boy, David, the most unexpected, unrecognised and youngest of Jesse’s sons, is anointed as king. *Eph 5:8-14*. We are invited to live in God’s light. *Jn 9*. Story of the gradual insight into Jesus of the man born blind. *Theme—Light & seeing*: Who or what enables us to see deeply and understand our lives and world? The readings encourage us to draw closer to the source of true light, Jesus.

**March 9—Lent 5:** *Ez 37:12-14*. God promises to open the graves of the dead and lead Israel back from Exile with a new spirit. *Rom 8:8-11*. God’s spirit possesses us. *Jn 11*. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. *Theme—Life & resurrection*: This Sunday climaxes all the great themes of Lent in preparation for Easter – our resurrection and life. What brings us to life? Are they any examples where this is happening in the local community?

**March 16—Passion:** *Mt 21:1-11* Jesus enters Jerusalem as its legitimate and recognised leader. *Is 50:4-7*. The song of the humble and attentive servant of God, ever alert and schooled in God’s ways. *Phil 2:6-11*. The famous hymn of Jesus’ embraced service. He becomes a slave and is exalted by God. *Mt 26:14-27:66*. The passion and death of Jesus, Israel’s exalted and humbled Leader. *Theme—The Suffering One*. Jesus reveals God’s solidarity with the suffering, struggling and rejected. Who are those who suffer today? Where is God’s presence needed in our struggling world?

**March 20—Holy Thursday.** *Ex 12:1-8,11-14*. The Passover meal of deliverance. *1 Cor 11:23-26* Paul remembers Jesus’ last meal with his friends before death. *Jn 13:1-15*. Jesus’ act of foot-washing is a symbol of service and solidarity *Theme—Leadership*: Jesus is the one who leads us to God. Leadership is the cry of our Church, world, community. Who reveals to us the most authentic values of human existence? What qualities of lead-

ership or needed for our nation, our Church, this community?

**March 21—Good Friday.** *Is 52:13-53:12.* This is another servant song that reflects on God's servant who is innocent and suffers for others. *Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9.* Jesus, the compassionate one, suffers with us. *Jn 18:1-19:42* Jesus, the exalted one, suffers, and dies as innocent lamb acclaimed as king. The moment of death is also one of exaltation and victory. It is the source of the church's sacramental life ('blood' = Eucharist; 'water' = baptism). *Theme—Victory.* God's solidarity revealed through Jesus with the cries of suffering emitted by creation and human beings. God is victorious over death.

**March 22 & 23—Easter:** *Mt 28:1-10.* The Risen Jesus brings joy to the women who come to the tomb *Theme—Joy.* In a world and among people that seem so sad and preoccupied with survival, the Easter message is central, offering an encouraging vision for us all: He is Risen.

**March 30—Easter 2** *Acts 2:42-47.* The ideal Jerusalem Christian community shares everything in common. *1 Pet 1:3-9.* The writer expresses the fruit of baptismal life. *Jn 20:19-31* The Risen Jesus offers peace to the assembled disciples: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' *Theme—Being Blessed.* The Easter presence of Jesus brings God's blessedness to human beings feeling terrorised by life and its demands. Gazing on the wounds of Jesus, Thomas comes to Easter faith. Our entrance into those spaces of woundedness allows the Risen One to be with us.

**April 6—Easter 3.** *Acts 2:14,22-28.* Luke summarises Peter's Pentecost sermon in terms of the Gospel's story about Jesus. *1 Pet 1:17-21.* God's vision of the relationship to God which all the baptised share. *Lk 24:13-35* Two unfaithful disciples experience the presence of the Risen Jesus in the Eucharistic moment. *Theme—Jesus' Presence.* Jesus continues to

be present to all, especially when darkness, blindness or personal issues seem to cloud that presence.

**April 13—Easter 4** *Acts 2:14,36-41.* As Peter preaches, Luke shows him appealing to his audience for a spirit of conversion to God. *1 Pet 2:20-25.* Jesus is the model of how to be with God in the midst of life's suffering. *Jn 10:1-10.* Jesus is the sheep-fold gate who allows access to God and protection for his community. *Theme—Jesus, the Gate:* We seek safety, security and protection. Jesus offers us a community where we can be at ease with God. What are some of the ways in which this happens in today's Eucharistic community?

**April 20—Easter 5** *Acts 6:1-7.* Seven are appointed to minister to the practical needs of the Jerusalem Christian community. Ministry is flexible, inclusive and respectful of the needs of the community. *1 Pet 2:4-9.* The baptised are members of a spiritual household are truly a holy priesthood. *Jn 14:1-12.* Jesus is the way, truth and life for people who feel troubled. *Theme—Royal Priesthood.* Our community that gathers each Sunday is precious. It is God's 'royal priesthood.' It is blessed and beloved by God. This can be named and celebrated. It is the heart of future ministry in a time when our focus shifts from a church dependent on the ordained to lay ecclesial leadership.

**April 27—Easter 6.** *Acts 8:5-8, 14-17.* Philip preaches to the Samaritans. Peter and John visit them and prays that the Samaritan will receive the Holy Spirit. A second Pentecost takes place! *1 Pet 3:15-18.* Reverence for God is at the heart of the Christian life. This enables the believer to act with integrity especially in times of difficulty or false-accusation. *Jn 14: 15-21.* Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit, his Advocate, who will be with his disciples. *Theme—Release of God's Holy Spirit.* God's Spirit permeates every atom of creation and fibre of our being. What a delight our world and lives are because of this.