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PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

JULY—OCTOBER

From the Fourteenth to the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 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 July and October 2008, from the Fourteenth to the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year A. Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

The readings over this time offer a unique opportunity to proclaim the readings of Ordinary Time, with only the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross (September 14) interrupting the flow of Ordinary Time readings. We can trace Matthew's Gospel over this period, given the Lectionary's unique method of Gospel selection and the way the First Reading is chosen with the Gospel in mind. The Second Reading, as usual, follows Paul's writings in a semi-continuous but selective fashion.

1. The First Readings allow us to proclaim selections mainly from the prophets (chiefly from Isaiah, but also Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Malachi), though readings also appear from the Torah (Exodus—OT 30), and the historical (1 Kings—OT 19) and wisdom (Sirach—OT 24) writings. The Book of Isaiah is frequently divided into three sections or 'books,' not written by the same author but reflecting a common spirit of the prophet and dealing with different periods of Israel's religious life

around the time of the Exile. For this reason, commentators talk of First-Isaiah (Is 1-39), Second-Isaiah (Is 40-55) and Third-Isaiah (Is 56-66). Our present selections cover all three books. First Isaiah (OT 21, 27 & 28) celebrates God's holiness and power which shapes the destinies of peoples. It calls Israel to integrity of life and fidelity to their covenant with God. Second Isaiah (OT 25, 29) seeks to comfort the exiled people of Israel and ensure them that God is always with them. Third Isaiah (OT 20) envisages a new moment where all peoples are gathered as one on God's holy mountain. All the prophetic writings enable present Christian communities to reflect on God's presence in the midst of our political and religious lives. They invite us to identify God's action in our world.

2. The Second Readings allow us to follow Paul's theological message to three of his communities, either ones that he was responsible for (Philippians, Thessalonians) or one that he was planning on visiting (Romans). In these Sundays of Ordinary Time we read Romans, from chapter 8 to the end of the letter. Paul is writing from Corinth around 55CEs and focuses on God's promises to Israel (OT 20, 21). He encourages the Roman Christian to live authentically within their own culture, conscious of God's presence with them (OT 22, 23). The readings from Philippians (Triumph

of the Cross, OT 25-28), written around 56 CE from Ephesus, offer an opportunity to meditate on the power of life with God and the kind of life that flows from this unity with God. Paul models and encourages the qualities of a faith-filled life focussed on Jesus. On OT 29-31 (October 19-30) we turn our thoughts to the final weeks of the liturgical year and begin reading from the earliest writing of the New Testament. I Thessalonians. The letter was written around 50CE from Corinth and explores some of the most fundamental concerns of Christian living: need for fidelity, openness with God and hospitality.

3. The Gospel readings continue from the Gospel of Matthew. This is a Jewish-Christian gospel, written in the late first century, to

a community undergoing transition, struggle and searching for how to live in its own culture, faithful to the spirit of Jesus and engaging life. Our selection covers Mt 14-23. This part of the gospel is concerned with missionary endeavour, dealing with internal division and understanding religious history. The evangelist presents a portrait of Jesus concerned about disciples who want to know how to handle conflict and develop a form of leadership that is clear and embracing of those who are excluded. The passages of Mt from OT 19-31 offer wonderful opportunities for contemporary Christian communities to reflect on their own issues: internal division, leadership and engagement with the wider society. These are the perennial and ever relevant concerns for all communities throughout history.

PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

July 6—Ordinary Time 14: Zech 9:9-10. God as King will come to deliver, protect and offer peace. Rom 8:9.11-13 We possess God's Spirit who empowers our daily lives. Mt 11:25-30 We are invited to come to Jesus who wants to be with us in our daily struggles. *Theme—God's Comfort.* Many people today feel the burdens of life. Our faith community gathered in this Sunday Assembly reflects a gentle God who seeks to offer support and comfort to those who struggle. How is this happening practically at a local level?

July 13—Ordinary Time 15: Is 55:10-11. God's Word is eternally effective. Rom 8:18-23. The whole of creation is caught up with humanity in the inward search for God and the release of God's spirit of renewal. Mt 13:1-23 This is the 'Great Parable' chapter of Mt's Gospel: God's Reign is present mysteriously and unexpectedly. *Theme—God's Presence.* To dispirited people the invitation to contemplate a God who is present, active and mystery is an essential truth. It uplifts, converts, strengthens and offers a fresh perspective.

July 20—Ordinary Time 16: Wis 12:13.16-19. God teaches, offers hope and wisdom. Rom

8:26-27. God's Spirit helps us in our weakness. Mt 13:24-43. This is the parable of good and evil. *Theme—Weakness.* The human experience of weakness and disaster invites us to draw close to a God who is present in our struggles. Mt's parables remind us of the realism of life's ambiguities which are part of discipleship and mysteriously reveal God's presence.

July 27—Ordinary Time 17: 1 Kings 3:5.7-12. Solomon is blessed for seeking wisdom and discernment rather than wealth Rom 8:28-30. God invites us to live in the image of Jesus. Mt 13:44-52. The parable concerns the search for the pearl of great price. *Theme—Wisdom:* All of us desire deep, lingering wisdom to live in peace and happiness with ourselves, others and God. Many illustrations abound where such wisdom is practiced by unwitting disciples.

August 3—Ordinary Time 18: Is 55:1-3. Everyone is invited to come to God and live deeply. Rom 8:35, 37-39. Nothing can separate us from Jesus' love for us. Mt 14:13-21. Jesus feeds the hungry crowds. *Theme—Being Nourished:* Our deepest desire is to be happy and interiorly nurtured. Through times

of difficulty, experiences of desertion, or even feelings of separation from God—all these can be interpreted as invitations for deeper spiritual nourishment. The journey ever continues.

August 10—Ordinary Time 19: I King 19: 9, 11-13. The prophet experiences God in the unexpected silence of nature. Rom 9:1-5. Paul affirms the role which the Jewish people play in God's plan of salvation. Mt 14:22-3. Jesus walks on the water, overcomes the powers that threaten to annihilate the household of disciples. Peter accompanies him. *Theme—God's Presence in difficult times:* Elijah experiences God's presence in the silence of nature after the natural violence that precedes it; Jesus overcomes the violence that attempts to overcome Mt's community represented by the boat. God's presence never deserts the household of disciples. This conviction continues today.

August 17—Ordinary Time 20: Is 56: 1, 6-7. Justice lies at the heart of being open to God and acting religiously. It is the source of unity. Rom 11:13-15, 29-32. Paul continues to acknowledge the role which the Jewish people have in God's plan. Mt 15:21-28. A non-Jewish woman's persistence pays off. Jesus blesses her and heals her daughter. *Theme—God's Attraction.* Faith communities show the attraction which God has for people; everyone is on the search for God. It is revealed in people's commitment to justice (1st reading) or their search to deal with seemingly insurmountable problems (Gospel).

August 24—Ordinary Time 21: Is 22:15, 19-23. Shebna, a royal official, is removed from office and Eliakim is given authority ('the key') over the royal household. Rom 11:33-36. Paul celebrates God and God's wisdom. Mt 16:13-20. Jesus is acknowledged as God's Messiah; Peter is commissioned with leadership. *Theme—Leadership and Authority:* Examples abound of political and religious leadership that is empowering and inclusive of those conventionally excluded. This is the kind of authority envisaged in Isaiah and Mt, and needed still.

August 31—Ordinary Time 22: Jer 20:7-9.

The prophet recognises the struggle of the prophetic vocation and mission. Rom 12:1-2. Paul encourages total spiritual renewal that is personal and social. Mt 16:21-27. Jesus prepares his disciples for the suffering that awaits. Peter, commissioned last week, becomes a stumbling block to Jesus this week. *Theme—Struggle:* Today's liturgy offers a moment to name the ways that faithful Christians in the local community struggle. They are authentic witnesses as contemporary prophets and disciples.

September 7—Ordinary Time 23: Ez 33:7-9. The prophet is entrusted with the task of speaking God's truth, even though this may be unpopular. Rom 13:8-10. Love of neighbour is the summary of the commandments. Mt 18:15-20. Jesus offers practical advice for dealing with internal tension. Ultimately, he is always present. *Theme—Tensions:* Faith communities will always experience difficulties and tensions. They are part of living out of God's truth (1st reading) and the human reality of communities (Gospel). What are some present difficulties being encountered?

September 14—Exaltation of the Holy Cross: Num 21:4-9. The struggle of the desert experience brings the Israelites to a renewed faith in God. Phil 2:6-11. Paul's hymn about Jesus praises his communion with human beings and his exaltation by God. Jn 3:15-17. God's love and desire for our world (and all humanity) is revealed in Jesus. *Theme—Suffering and God's presence:* Stories abound of human suffering and struggle. God's communion with creation and humanity in the midst of pain, even death, is celebrated as we reflect on those who show us God's compassion evident through their own suffering. This is a good moment to offer the Anointing of the Sick.

September 21—Ordinary Time 25: Is 55:6-9. The Prophet's invitation to seek out and experience the surprising and mysterious God. Phil 1:20-24,27. Paul acknowledges his deep desire to die and be with God, and his commitment for his people. Mt 20:1-16. The parable about God's surprising generosity and the reversal of fortune. *Theme—A Surprising God.*

Today's readings invite us into a meditation and celebration on the surprising nature of God, as generous, loving and unfathomable. What are our dominant images of God? How do these shape our actions and influence our faith communities?

September 28—Ordinary Time 26: Ez 18:25-28. The prophet celebrates God's forgiving nature and the human possibility of change and repentance. Phil 2:1-11. We are invited to have the mind of Jesus as we reflect upon the great hymn about Jesus' mission and status. Mt 21:28-32. The socially and morally unexpected who have the capacity for change and repentance are invited into God's community. *Theme—Change and Repentance:* The liturgy presents a moment to encourage and offer hope for those who feel cut off or excluded. Repentance and change are always possible (Gospel). God always embraces the repentant (1st Reading) and this Eucharist can be the moment of forgiveness and healing.

October 5—Ordinary Time 27: Is 5:1-7. God's people are like a cared-for vineyard, sometimes fruitless. Phil 4:6-9. Paul offers encouragement not to worry, but live faithfully and confidently in peace. Mt 21:33-43. The parable of what happens to the servants and son of the vineyard owner is an allegory of Mt's community: its struggles and suffering. *Theme—Suffering.* Mt's Jewish Christian community sees its own story in today's Gospel. To live with integrity and authenticity comes at a cost. Are there local and pertinent examples of this?

October 12—Ordinary Time 28: Is 25:6-10a. Paradise is presented here as a mountain feast with choice foods and wines. Phil 4:10-14, 19-20. In all that happens to him, no matter his physical or financial resources, Paul's ultimate focus is always God. Mt 22:1-14. God lavishes a banquet is for all, 'good and bad.' *Theme—Eucharistic Inclusiveness.* The local

Eucharistic celebration is a reflection of the Universal Church: How does it celebrate inclusiveness in a world of cultural diversity?

October 19—Ordinary Time 29: Is 45:1,4-6. An unexpected non-Jewish military emperor becomes God's agent of salvation. 1 Thes 1:1-5. Paul addresses a community with faith and openness in God. Mt 22:15-21. Jesus avoids a trap set by the religious leaders. God is the true source of all life, even political. *Theme—God and Politics.* An opportunity to reflect on the way God and religion have been co-opted into contemporary politics and military affairs, and offer an alternative focus: The heart of life and human community is God (1st Reading and Gospel), not the human whim for power or the seduction of privilege.

October 26—Ordinary Time 30: Ex 22:21-27. God's concern for the Israelites is to attend to the poor and not oppress the resident alien. 1 Thes 1:5-10. Paul praises the Thessalonians for their hospitality and openness to God's preached word. Mt 22:34-40. Jesus summarises the heart of ethical life: love of God and neighbour. *Theme—Hospitality to the Stranger.* The treatment of the socially forgotten, excluded and the poor in our communities is the touchstone of authentic religious life. A number of positive examples from the local scene can illustrate the living out of such faith.

October 30—Ordinary Time 31: Malachi 1:14-2:2,8-10. God critiques the practice and infidelity of Israel's religious leaders. 1 Thes 2:7-9,13. Paul offers himself as a model of care, commitment and fidelity. Mt 23:1-12. Status and privilege are not part of the life of the Christian community. *Theme—Authentic Leadership.* The readings (1st reading and Gospel) offer an opportunity to highlight the qualities of authentic political and religious leadership: integrity, humility and service of others.