



# The Lectionary Life

by Jonathan Aitken

**T**HE ARRIVAL OF THE BLEAK MIDWINTER month of February provokes the thought that this column should temporarily be renamed Low Spirits. For those of us who live and move in the northern hemisphere, the weather is miserable, the markets are plummeting, and pessimism abounds. Although our spiritual lives should rise above such transient negatives, it is not so easy to be positive, let alone in high spirits, after the joyful church seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany have given way to lugubrious Lent, which starts early this year on February 6.

The ancient disciplines of Lent such as penance, fasting, or wearing sackcloth and ashes have little or no appeal to modern believers—perhaps rightly so since these traditions are out of tune with the zeitgeist of our times. Nevertheless the thought that at the beginning of each calendar or ecclesiastical year we might accept some new spiritual discipline designed to deepen our relationship with God is surely as valid as ever. So in that context I offer a recommendation that annually brings me good spirits, often high spirits. It is the discipline of living life with the lectionary.

A good starting point for the lectionary-based spiritual life is a date in the church calendar that many denominations call Bible Sunday. It is marked in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* by a majestic collect from the pen of Thomas Cranmer:

*Blessed Lord who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may*

*in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...*

These sonorous words emphasize the duty of regular Bible study. But how should we go about the task of reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting the good book? Advice on this topic is not in short supply. The shelves of spiritual bookstores groan with Bible guides ranging from slender one-verse-a-day devotionals to weighty tomes with titles like *How to Read the Bible in One Year*. But these are no substitute for the lectionary, which is the official compendium of the church's appointed readings of Scripture for every day of the year. The word "church" in this context means a surprisingly broad front of denominations, including Catholics, Protestants, and Pentecostals who have united in this endeavour to encourage God's people to read the same passages of God's word on the same date.

The origins of the lectionary (an exclusively ecclesiastical term) lie deep in the monastic world of the medieval church. The monks who kept the daily offices also kept meticulous records of their readings. They included at least one of the Psalms of David from the Old Testament and a passage from the New Testament, usually from one of the Gospels. These readings often blend into a common spiritual theme and have a measure of continuity. They are designed to be read aloud at masses, communions, or services of morning and evening prayer.

The classic lectionary is the Roman Catholic *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, whose original compilers

are said to have included Augustine of Hippo. I find it historically as well as theologically reassuring to turn to my 2008 lectionary on, say, the first day of Lent and to be united across the centuries as well as across contemporary church divisions in the recommended lectionary readings for this date. They are Psalm 51, King David's abject poem of penitence after Nathan the prophet had castigated him for his affair with Bathsheeba and his murder of Uriah the Hittite; Joel, Chapter 2, "Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love"; and John 8: 1-11, the story of the woman caught in adultery. Together they make a stirring biblical introduction to a 40-day season of repentance and redemption.

**T**HE POINT OF THE LECTIONARY is that it guides readers through well-trodden paths of Scripture with unseen companions, conservatively numbered in the hundreds of millions, from all parts of the body of Christ around the world. The chosen passages can be explored at different depths. Those wishing to relish them in the full should supplement their lectionary with a commentary. This brings a second dimension of enjoyment to lectionary life because it is so easy to choose a commentator that suits your own theological, denominational, or personal taste. Again the bookstore shelves are groaning with every imaginable volume in this genre of biblical exposition. My own inclination is to skip the tutorials of the great scholars (do I really want to know who wrote which chapter of Isaiah?) and to be inspired by the insights of legendary preachers.

Right now, as the lectionary is taking me through St. Matthew's Gospel at a steady pace of about eight verses a day, my commentator is J.C. Ryle, the 19th-century Bishop of Liverpool. He explains in the preface to his *Expository Thoughts on Matthew* (first published in 1856 and still selling well!) that his style will be "plain and pointed.... I have tried to place myself in the position of one who is addressing a mixed company and has but a short time." Ryle's brevity means that I can get through the appointed Gospel reading and his comments on it in ten minutes or so, which is no great sacrifice even in a crowded day's schedule.

If time is not pressing, then my favorite commentator on the Psalms is the prolific Baptist

preacher C.H. Spurgeon. Brevity is not his talent, for his magisterial *Treasury of David* runs to five volumes. However, since it contains the views of all other known commentators of his age on each and

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every Psalm, this is a definitive work of reference that can be dipped into lightly as well as studied seriously.

**I** HOPE I AM NOT MAKING LIFE with the lectionary sound arduous. Even when reinforced by commentaries, it rarely takes up more than half an hour each morning. But the structure that the thematic flow of Scripture provides to my daily quiet time is a joy as well as a duty. It is further enlivened by one other subsidiary pleasure of the lectionary, which is its regular highlighting of saints days.

In February, for example, we are reminded that on the 14th day of the month, St. Valentine should be commemorated for his martyrdom in Rome in AD 269. However, further and better particulars of this holy man are largely apocryphal. The lectionary draws a discreet veil over the pagan processes by which Valentine became the patron saint of lovers. Some lewd verses by Chaucer based on the rural legend that songbirds select their mates halfway through the second month of the year appear to be responsible for the tradition that keeps alive the modern practice of giving flowers, chocolates, and heart-shaped cards to our loved ones on February 14. This is a long way from the ancient calling to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest "the Scriptures."

Perhaps I shall combine the ancient with the modern by presenting my beloved with the lectionary on St. Valentine's Day. ❧

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**Jonathan Aitken**, The American Spectator's *High Spirits* columnist, is most recently author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway Books). His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)* and *Nixon: A Life, now available in a new paperback edition (Regnery)*.