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RECLAIMING THOMAS CRANMER'S VISION

*A Proposed Daily Office Lectionary for
The Anglican Church in North America*

*Blessed Lord, who hast 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, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.*¹

Across North America, orthodox Anglicans have been seeking new structures and tools to help them to be able to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”² Among these have been a series of new prayer books (*e.g.* those of the Reformed Episcopal Church in 2003 and the Anglican Mission in the Americas in 2008). And now, of course, the Anglican Church in North America is in the midst of producing a book that is both new and in keeping with our ancient and Godly Anglican heritage. With this new prayer book, of course, must come a new daily office lectionary.

We have strayed far from our roots. The most damning evidence is found in Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s preface to the first English Prayer Book of 1549, which **places the reading of the whole Bible at the forefront of his justification for the reformation of liturgy** in 16th-century England:

The ancient fathers . . . so ordered the matter, that all the whole Bible (or the greatest part thereof) should be read over once in the year, intending thereby, that the Clergy, and especially such as were Ministers of the congregation, should (by often reading, and meditation of God’s word) be stirred up to godliness themselves, and be more able to exhort others by wholesome doctrine, and to confute them that were adversaries to the truth. And further, that the people (by daily hearing of holy Scripture read in the Church) should continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God, and be the more inflamed with the love of his true religion. But these many years passed, this godly and decent order of the ancient fathers hath been so altered, broken, and neglected, by planting in uncertain stories, Legends, Responds, Verses, vain repetitions, Commemorations, and Synodals, that commonly when any book of the Bible was

¹ The Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662)

² Jude 3

begun, before three or four Chapters were read out, all the rest were unread. And in this sort the book of Isaiah was begun in Advent, and the book of Genesis in Septuagesima; but they were only begun, and never read through. After a like sort were other books of holy Scripture used.³

From the above we can glean three clear priorities for the daily office lectionary:

- Read “the whole Bible (or the greatest part thereof)”
- Read it “once in the year” (*i.e.* don’t take two or three years)
- Read the books through as a whole (without breaks that would hinder comprehension)

THE LECTIONARY OF 1549⁴

Old Testament

The first Anglican Prayer Book introduced the recitation of the whole Psalter in a 30-day pattern. Thus the Psalms are the one Old Testament book that was read through twelve times in the year. It must be noted, however, that this was actually a significant simplification of the long-held tradition in the church of reciting the whole Psalter once per *week* (a practice which continued in the Roman Catholic Church into the 20th century).⁵

Of the remaining Canonical books of the O.T., 29 are read in their entirety. The great majority of four others are read (73% of Exodus⁶, 75% of Numbers, 90% of Esther, and 98% of Genesis⁷). Two more are *heavily* curtailed (we read only 19% of Ezekiel, and 11% of Leviticus). There are three books which are entirely omitted (1 and 2 Chronicles, and The Song of Solomon).

The pattern in the lectionary is to split the O.T. books between Morning and Evening Prayer. For example: on January 2,⁸ Genesis chapter 1 is read in the morning and chapter 2 in the evening—alternating back and forth until the whole book is completed at Morning Prayer on the 27th.

³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), p. 866. *Note – the spelling and punctuation were modernized in the 1979 book, but the meaning is unchanged from the original.*

⁴ *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI* (London: J.M.Dent and Sons, 1957), pp. 8-20.

⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1989), pp. 1140, 199.

⁶ For simplicity sake, percentages are calculated here and elsewhere by the number of chapters read. If portions of chapters are read, an estimation is made (*e.g.* 25% or 50% of the chapter, etc...).

⁷ In Genesis, chapter 10 alone is omitted: “The Descendants of Noah”

⁸ January 1 is a Holy Day (*The feast of the Circumcision*) with its own special set of readings.

Apocrypha

Our early Anglican reformers were very fond of the Apocrypha. All told, about three quarters of the Apocrypha is assigned with the only significant omissions being 1 and 2 Maccabees and the additions to Esther.⁹ Nearly two months in the year are devoted to the Apocrypha (54 days or 108 readings counting both Morning and Evening Prayer).

New Testament

The Pattern of the New Testament is different than the Old in that it is sequential within each office. For example, the second reading of Morning Prayer is an unbroken sequence of the Four Gospels and Acts, repeated three times in the year. Evening Prayer likewise starts with Romans and continues through the Epistles in canonical order through Jude (also repeating three times in the year).

The glaring omission of the 1549 N.T. lectionary is that it includes only two readings from the book of Revelation: chapters 1 and 22 on the feast day of St. John the Evangelist (December 27). Put in percentage terms, over the course of a year one reads 300% of the first 26 books of the N.T., yet only 9% of Revelation. One wonders, if Martin Luther had put together our New Testament lectionary, would he have skipped the book of James (reportedly *his* least favorite)? This omission, and that of the Song of Solomon and others in the O.T., set a dangerous precedent within Anglicanism that only balloons as time passes. The books and chapters which Cranmer terms “least edifying”¹⁰ in 1549 change and expand with new generations and migrating mores (more on this subject below).

Holy Days

In the 1549 calendar, 11 days are given their own special set of readings which interrupt the continuity of the lectionary. Thus Cranmer adheres to his principle of greatly curtailing interruptions in the sequential reading of the canonical books, while still setting the precedent that certain (few) days might be excepted from the rule.

THE PRESENT STANDARD (1871)

As the Prayer Book underwent revision, so did the lectionary. In fact, if you were to buy a “1662 Book of Common Prayer” today it is most likely that you would find it contained the lectionary approved by the Church of England in 1871 within its covers.¹¹ My own copy of the 1662 Book, picked up while studying in England, contains the following note behind the title page:

⁹ It was unclear to me whether they would have read the Prayer of Azariah within Daniel 3, it is not assigned as a separate reading, while the other “additions to Daniel” *are* specifically included.

¹⁰ *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI* (London: J.M.Dent and Sons, 1957), p. 8.

¹¹ *An Anglican Prayer Book* (Swedesboro, NJ: Preservation Press, 2008), p. 172

*This edition includes the various amendments to the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 that are contained in the following Measures:
Clergy (Ordination and Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1964
Prayer Book (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1965
Prayer book (Further Provisions) 1968.¹²*

Hint: this is no longer the lectionary of your Anglican forebears. While the lectionary of 1871 bears a family resemblance to that of 1549, it greatly expands the omissions, enters new realms of “political correctness” and also goes a long way toward undoing the simplicity that Cranmer *et al* sought to achieve in the 16th century.

Old Testament

While approximately 83% of the O.T. was read in the 1549, by 1871 that figure is down to 68%. And it's not just genealogies and redundancies that are omitted. The only books of the O.T. that are read in their entirety (apart from the Psalms which are still read monthly) are the shortest books—Ruth, and eight of the Minor Prophets. The editing of many books is heavy. For example, all of The Book of Joshua is read in 1549, but less than half in 1879. Isaiah remains popular (89%), but Jeremiah has fallen out of favor (46%). Ezekiel's stock is up (from 19% to 44%), but Exodus' is down (from 73% to 45%). These are just a few samples.

Since a careful and exhaustive treatment of the migration of priorities would be book-length, a few anecdotes will have to serve: In 1549 all of Genesis is read except chapter 10 (as noted above). By 1879 there are fourteen slices taken out, some of them more than a chapter in length. For example, 19.1-11 and 19.31-38 are omitted (the first includes the men of Sodom desiring to rape Lot and the second includes Lot's daughters sleeping with their father while he is drunk). It is hard to escape the idea that Victorian sensibilities have guided the editing of this lectionary. With that in mind, it is no surprise that the Song of Solomon is the *only* book of the Old Testament to be completely absent from this lectionary (a carry-over from 1549).¹³

A further anecdote reinforcing this point is the absurd omission of 2 Samuel 13.1-37 (The rape of Tamar and Amnon's subsequent murder at the hands of his brother Absalom). Without this episode, the next seven chapters of 2 Samuel make no sense! Nor do we see the complete fulfillment of the judgment pronounced by Nathan the prophet in 12.6—and that's just for starters! This is clearly a new generation grabbing hold of Cranmer's exception and eliminating passages that are “least edifying”—only there are apparently more unedifying

¹² *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1986), p. 2

¹³ The Book of Lamentations is also omitted from the main lectionary, but portions are picked up in the Proper Lessons for Holy Week.

scriptures by 1871 than there were in 1549. Any guesses as to how this trend continued into the 20th century?

Another snippet: There is only one passage of 1 Chronicles in the lectionary — 29.10-30 (in 1549 there were none) — one may wonder why? It turns out that this is substituted in place of 1 Kings 1.28-chapter 2. So we still read of David's death and Solomon's crowning, but we miss the messy details concerning Solomon's execution of his political enemies.

A final tidbit to give you a picture of the kind of editing found in the 1871 lectionary is this fact: 25% of the book of Proverbs is omitted. There is a whole school of devotion, widely practiced today, that reads *all* of Proverbs *every month*. I don't know how anyone can find 25% of Proverbs that's not worth reading.

Apocrypha

The Apocrypha is still read in the 1871 lectionary, but it has clearly fallen in priority. While most of the books of the Apocrypha were read in 1549 (accounting for 74% of the potential chapters), by 1871 only portions of three books are read—Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom and Baruch (22% of the total). The amount of time devoted to the Apocrypha is reduced from 54 days (108 readings) in 1549 to 21 days (42 readings) in 1871.

New Testament

There are a few significant changes to the New Testament portion of the lectionary—mostly, in my opinion, for the better. The first change is that rather than reading the Gospels and Acts only in Morning Prayer and Epistles in the Evening. The Bible is read from Matthew – Jude in *both* Morning and Evening Prayer. Also, most of the Book of Revelation is now included (but read only once compared to the other 26 books of the N.T. which are read twice).

There are three and a half chapters of the New Testament which are never read: Revelation 9, 13 and 17; and Matthew 1.1-17 (The Genealogy of Christ). Apparently Revelation is now *mostly*, but not entirely, edifying; but the 17 verses which begin the New Testament (in Matthew's Gospel) have somehow fallen out of favor.

Holy Days

Here the 1871 lectionary makes a serious attempt to undo the good Cranmer and his allies did in simplifying the lectionary. From 11 Holy Days in 1549 we now have 22 interrupting the flow of readings. But that does not even count an additional 12 *floating* Holy Days assigned for Holy Week, Easter Week, Ascension and Whitsun Week. So not only are there 22 days inserted in the cycle, but the additional 12 actually *bump* the set readings so that they will not be read at all that year. This yields a total of more than a month of interruptions in the 1871 lectionary.

It gets worse. There is also an entirely different schedule of “Lessons Proper For Sundays.”¹⁴ I’m not sure how commonly it was employed, but if this schedule is used as well, this would substitute for the Old Testament lesson for both Morning and Evening Prayer the first day of *every* week. It is no small leap from there to what we have in many of our modern lectionaries — a completely different set of lessons for Sunday which seriously compromise the ability to read and comprehend Books of the Bible as a whole through the Daily Office.¹⁵

MODERN LECTIONARIES

The most damaging feature of many modern Anglican lectionaries is *not* the passages they omit (as egregious as those omissions are), but rather that *they follow the liturgical year!* The abandonment of the calendar-year lectionary was accomplished in the American church with the introduction of the 1928 Prayer Book (and continues to this day). You will find there is a lot of company on this point among North American Anglicans. For example, the daily office lectionary in the new REC Prayer Book (2003) follows the liturgical year as well as that of the “traditional” Prayer Book of the Anglican Church of Canada (1962).

While many modern lectionaries continue (and expand upon) the practice of selective scripture omission according to prevailing theological correctness and mores¹⁶, the liturgical year calendar makes it *impossible* to either read “the whole Bible (or the greatest part thereof) . . . once in the year”¹⁷ or to avoid dropping entire books of the Bible in the middle never to return to them in the course of the year.

A study of the first fifty years of the twenty-first century yields the following results regarding the frequency of certain weeks appearing in the liturgical year (when the traditional pre-Lenten sets of readings are included):

Sundays After Epiphany	
1st	100%
2nd	98%
3rd	80%
4th	58%
5th	32%
6th	4%

¹⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1986), p. 14

¹⁵ See *e.g.* the American Prayer Books of 1928 and 1979 and the Canadian Prayer Book of 1962

¹⁶ One example—Romans 1.26-27 has disappeared from the 1979 lectionary:

“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”

¹⁷ Cranmer, *op. cit.*

You have a similar result with the Sundays after Trinity (or Christmas).

In addition to the uncertainty regarding weeks actually appearing in a particular calendar year, you have the jolt of reading one set of scriptures, then dropping them completely when a transition is made from one season to another (Epiphany to pre-Lent; Trinity to pre-Advent, etc. . . .). We have returned to the state of affairs that Cranmer decried in 1549 when he wrote:

[T]hat commonly when any book of the Bible was begun, before three or four Chapters were read out, all the rest were unread. And in this sort the book of Isaiah was begun in Advent, and the book of Genesis in Septuagesima; but they were only begun, and never read through. After a like sort were other books of holy Scripture used.¹⁸

For an illustration, let's look at how some of the above difficulties play out in the 1962 Canadian daily office lectionary:

1. The book of Isaiah is primarily read in Advent. This, of course, is one of the most important books of the O.T. for Christians. Chapters wholly missing include: 15, 16, 20, 23, 27, 33, 34, 36, 37 and 39. Chapters only read in part include: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 21, 22, 25, 26, 28, 32, 38, 40 and 41. Other chapters or portions of chapters are only read 50% of the time because they're assigned to a Sunday (2-yr cycle). Chapters 51-62 are scheduled for the weekdays after 4 Advent (and before Christmas) which are decreasingly likely to occur as the week continues. This is partly made up by portions of them being scattered in increments throughout the year, but that ruins any sense of continuity. That's just one O.T. Book.
2. The Liturgical calendar wreaks havoc on the continuity of Bible reading: Parts (only parts, mind) of Jeremiah 1-15 are read in 4 Epiphany (about half the time). Bits of 17-35 are read in 5 Epiphany (about 1/3 of the time). Jeremiah is picked up again half a year later in 14-16 Trinity (which fortunately always occurs), but the set is incomplete—parts of 19-44. Jeremiah 45-51 does not appear at all.
3. One way to try to make a liturgical year daily office lectionary work is to put less important things in weeks that don't always occur. The Canadian lectionary attempts this by choosing the 1st lesson in the last few weeks of the Trinity season from the Apocrypha. The NT is from Acts, but that is just a duplication of the Easter season when Acts is read in its entirety. But this type of accommodation is at the expense of much of the canonical scriptures which are not read at all. It is well known, *e.g.*, that most of the Song of Solomon is missing, but less discussed are the omissions from 1 and 2 Chronicles among others. Even if the latter are to eliminate

¹⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), *op. cit.*

duplications from Samuel and Kings, do we treat the Synoptic Gospels the same?

These are just samples to illustrate that any liturgical year daily office lectionary is fundamentally flawed. It is also a surprisingly recent innovation: The clear Anglican standard for more than three centuries has been the calendar year lectionary from 1549 through the 1662 and even up to the Church of England revision of 1871—not only for the sake of continuity and comprehension, but also to be able to read “all the whole Bible (or the greatest part thereof).”

A LECTIONARY FOR A RENEWED NORTH AMERICAN ANGLICANISM

The Goal of this lectionary is to honor Cranmer’s original priorities without making arbitrary judgments as to which of the canonical scriptures are edifying and which are not. For according to God’s own word: “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”¹⁹ It is best to look at this, not as a new lectionary, but rather a reformed or even reactionary document. It takes us back to our roots.

The guiding principles in the organization of this lectionary are as follows:

1. Read the whole Bible
2. Read the books in a somewhat chronological order
3. Provide flexibility for a one-year or two-year cycle

Old Testament

One or two Psalms are appointed for both Morning and Evening Prayer. The Psalter is recited through six times per year if both offices are read. However, they are spaced in such a way that even if you divide the lectionary into a two-year cycle (reading the lessons for Morning Prayer in year-1 and Evening Prayer in year-2) you will still read the entire Psalter three times each year.

Taking a cue from the first Anglican Lectionaries in their organization of the New Testament readings, the remaining books of the Old Testament are not split between Morning and Evening Prayer but unified within each office. For example, you will read the whole of Genesis in Morning Prayer alone, etc. . . . As a whole, the O.T. readings of Morning Prayer primarily consist of the majority of the Historical books, with the addition of the books of Daniel and 1 Maccabees.

¹⁹ 2 Timothy 3.16-17

The O.T. readings of evening Prayer are primarily from the Wisdom and Prophetic writings, although you will also find Deuteronomy as well as 1 and 2 Chronicles. This is in order to provide a portion of the Law and the story of the Davidic kingdom in both offices for those who wish to divide the readings into a two-year cycle.

Apocrypha

This lectionary maintains the tradition of reading a portion of the Apocrypha (though not at the expense of any of the canonical books of the Old Testament). Other than a few passages read on February 29, the principle Apocryphal book included is the whole of 1 Maccabees. This is read at the end of the year in Morning Prayer (or year-1 of a two-year cycle) in order to provide an historical bridge between the Old and New Testaments. There are 32 total readings from the Apocrypha in this lectionary compared with 42 in the current standard (1871). Should the College of Bishops choose to have the church read larger sections of the Apocrypha, this may easily be accomplished by simply lengthening some of the readings of the canonical O.T. in order to make room in the calendar.

New Testament

The entire New Testament is read in both offices. The readings are staggered so that, for the most part, when a Gospel is being read in one office, an Epistle is being read in the other.

Holy Days

Some may question the wisdom to exclude both fixed and floating Holy Days in this lectionary. This has come from many years' trial use in which it was determined that the benefits of seasonal readings were outweighed by the cost of breaking the continuity of the continuous cycle of reading. In practice in my own parish, I have accommodated this by publishing supplemental devotional lectionaries for various seasons, (*e.g. Advent-Christmas* and *Ash Wednesday – Trinity Sunday*), which I'd be happy to share with anyone who is interested. These were written for family use and private devotions during the seasons. I have also produced a shorter daily office lectionary intended for use by older children and adults who are new to the Bible which I believe could be of use to the wider church.

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