

A SWITCHER'S GUIDE TO
THE 1662 SUNDAY
LECTIONARY



*The logic of the epistles, gospels, & lessons in
The 1662 Book of Common Prayer:
International Edition*

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INTRODUCTION

These notes discuss the Sunday readings in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, that is, the Sunday lessons, epistles, and gospels (as well as any proper psalms). They are not meant to be expositions of these passages. For that, the reader should turn to resources like Lectionary Central, as well as the many good commentaries on the historic Western eucharistic lectionary.¹

These notes have a simpler purpose: they sketch the logic of the 1662 readings. They are especially designed for those who are used to one of the other lectionaries used by Anglicans and Episcopalians in North America. In other words, these notes offer a “switcher’s guide” for clergy who are using the 1662 BCP for the first time.

The 1662 Sunday lectionary assumes that there are three services: Morning Prayer (with Litany), followed by Ante-Communion (or a full Communion service), and later in the day, Evening Prayer. The connections between the readings often operate across these different services. For parishes less familiar with this pattern, it may be useful to abbreviate Morning Prayer. On page 720 of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer: International Edition, there are instructions for how Morning Prayer could be abbreviated when it is followed by Communion or Ante-Communion. In the absence of Morning Prayer it may be

1 These include Richard Taverner’s *Postils* (1540); Martin Luther’s *Church Postil* (1544); Johann Gerhard’s *Postilia* (1613); John Boys’ *Expositions of the Dominical and Festival Epistles and Gospels* (1622); and Charles Wheatley’s *A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer* (1752). A later commentary is *The Christian Year: Prayer-Book Collects for every Sunday and Holy Day of the Church’s Year* (1961), edited by H. W. Dobson. There are also meditations only on the gospels, such as Frank Colquhoun’s *The Gospels: For the Sundays and Principal Holy Days of the Church’s Year* (1963) and Raymond Chapman’s *The Canterbury Companion to the Book of Common Prayer Gospels* (2013).

desirable to insert the Sunday first lesson into Communion (see the instructions on page 722).

Note that as a general rule the 1662 provides only proper *first* lessons for Sundays. In other words, on Sundays the first lessons come from a special Sunday Old Testament lectionary (pages xxix-xxxi), but the second lessons are the ones appointed in the daily office lectionary (pages xxxiv-lvii). The four exceptions are the Sunday next before Easter, Easter Day, Whitsunday, and Trinity Sunday—these Sundays have their own proper second lessons (page xxx).

In Cranmer's original design, a few red letter days had proper first lessons and most had proper second lessons, but the reading in course that happened during daily Mattins and Evensong was continued on all but three Sundays. During Elizabeth's reign, Archbishop Parker revised the calendar, adding proper first lessons for every Sunday of the year, which created a kind of compromise for Morning and Evening Prayer on Sundays: a greatest-hits lectionary for the Old Testament, while in-course reading continues for the New Testament. This system was especially advantageous for those who participated in the daily offices only on Sundays, because it provided a sense of the narrative arc of the whole Old Testament that they otherwise would not have. But Parker did not only have them in mind. His sequence of Sunday first lessons from the Old Testament also frequently complements the epistle and gospel in the eucharistic lectionary.

Included with these notes is a list of hymns tied to each reading. This list is of course suggestive, not exhaustive.

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THE ADVENT SEASON

Advent in the 1662 lectionary is simpler and less rushed than in the late-modern three-year lectionaries. You start easing into it with the Sunday next before Advent, when the epistle and gospel tell of the Messiah who will be both king and prophet. Then there are a full four Sundays of Advent. In this way, the 1662 lectionary assumes you are going to church on Christmas Day, and that you are celebrating the Annunciation on March 25 and the reign of Christ on Ascension Day, just as the church has done for many centuries. That means that the Ascension and Annunciation don't need to be shoehorned into late November and mid-December, and the Christmas story doesn't need to be moved up to Advent 4.

On each Sunday in Advent the epistle and gospel, taken together, highlight both the first coming of Christ in humility and the second coming in judgment. So you never have an epistle and gospel pairing that are just about the first coming or just about the second coming. The collect for Advent 1, said throughout the whole season, has this same dual focus.

Note that on all four Sundays in Advent, either the epistle or gospel has an explicit quotation from the Old Testament. The message is clear: the accomplished advent and the one to come are fulfilling God's ancient promises to the patriarchs and prophets.

ADVENT 1

The epistle highlights the second coming, while the gospel highlights the first coming. Both are from the historic Western eucharistic lectionary, though Archbishop Cranmer lengthened the gospel reading to include the cleansing of the temple. That lengthening makes the

gospel end on a note of divine judgment (as well as reformation of the church—the temple of God). That note ties the two readings together.

The epistle emphasizes love. Every major season or cycle of the church year begins with an emphasis on love (Advent 1 epistle, for the Christmas cycle; Quinquagesima epistle, for the Easter cycle; and Whitsunday gospel and Trinity 1 gospel for the Trinity season).

The Sunday first lessons, Isaiah 1 and 2, are filled with both judgment and salvation. With these lessons, the Sunday selections from Isaiah begin, and they will continue through all the Sundays after the Epiphany. Reading Isaiah in Advent is a very old tradition of the church, and this choice of “the fifth gospel” encourages the church to hear the Old Testament lessons throughout the year as speaking of Christ.

The theme of judgment and purification in Isaiah 1 (especially verses 12-17 and 21-26) matches the cleansing of the temple at the end of the gospel.

* * *

Mattins 1	Christ is made the sure foundation There is a fountain filled with blood
Epistle	Wake, awake, for night is flying The advent of our king Lo! he comes with clouds descending Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding
Gospel	O Lord, how shall I meet thee Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates Prepare the way, O Zion! Hosanna to the living Lord!

Evensong 1 Behold! the mountain of the Lord
 Not unto us, O Lord of heaven
 All praise to God, who reigns above

ADVENT 2

The epistle includes prophecies of the first coming, while the gospel has our Lord's own prediction of his second coming. Two themes run across both readings: expectancy (patience, hope, lifting up your eyes), and the trustworthiness of God's word. That latter theme is also emphasized in the collect of the day.

In the epistle, the Scriptures are treated as the common property of all people, and the quotations from the Old Testament prophets describe the extension of God's covenant to the Gentiles. This theme of mutual welcome and reconciliation across the ethnic divide of the ancient world connects with the *Nunc dimittis* (second canticle at Evensong) and anticipates the Circumcision of Christ (January 1) and the Epiphany (January 6).

Most of the Advent epistles emphasize the work of Jesus Christ (Advent 1: "put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ"; Advent 3: "he that judgeth me is the Lord"; Advent 4: kept "through Christ Jesus"). This epistle also emphasizes another person of the Trinity, for our abounding in hope happens "through the power of the Holy Ghost."

These readings continue the emphasis on the theological virtues: love (Advent 1 epistle), hope (Advent 2 epistle), and faith (Advent 3 gospel). Note that the epistle refers to Jesus Christ as a "minister," or servant, and the following Sunday the collect and epistle will develop the theme of "the ministers of Christ."

The Sunday first lessons, Isaiah 5 and 24, are filled with dramatic

prophecies of judgment, especially for the house of God (compare the Advent 1 gospel). The imagery is total: the vineyard is destroyed (Isaiah 5), the city ruined (Isaiah 24).

Yet promises of salvation are there as well. In the first lesson for Mattins, the sinners say with dramatic irony: “Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it!” (Isaiah 5:19). In the first lesson for Evensong, we anticipate that this will be good news, for not only will God judge but he will establish his reign and mankind will sing (Isaiah 24: 14, 15, 24).

* * *

Mattins 1	Judge eternal, throned in splendor Arm of the Lord, awake, awake!
Epistle	Father of mercies, in thy word O Word of God incarnate O come, O come Emmanuel
Gospel	O Word that goest forth on high Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding Lo! he comes with clouds descending
Evensong 1	O Savior, rend the heavens wide The Lord will come and not be slow

ADVENT 3

The epistle looks toward the second coming of Christ, and it teaches that we all, especially ministers of the gospel, have to account for our stewardship on the last day. The gospel reading is about the first advent, and it introduces John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. The

previous Sundays have pointed to the theological virtues of love and hope, and this gospel points to faith: is Jesus the promised Messiah?

John the Baptist preached repentance. That means there is a parallel structure: the four gospels begin with John the Baptist's message of repentance; the church year begins with Advent, a season of repentance; and the daily and weekly services in the Prayer Book begin with repentance (confession and absolution, collect for purity and Decalogue).

There is an important progression from Advent 2, with its theme of Scripture, to Advent 3, with its theme of ministry: the church's ministers do not have autonomous authority or stand over the Scriptures (compare Article 20).

Now if you are used to a late-modern lectionary, you may be in the habit of thinking of Advent 3 as focusing on joy (accompanied by a rose-colored candle in the Advent wreath). But that's not the approach in the traditional Western eucharistic lectionary.² It does have a reading that begins "Rejoice"—but not yet. That is coming in the epistle for Advent 4.

That progression makes sense. The traditional Western eucharistic lectionary doesn't rush things. With Advent 3 we think about judgment, of giving an account to God; but on Advent 4, as Christmas draws near, our hearts are filled with rejoicing. With Advent 3, the gospel has us asking with John the Baptist, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" And with Advent 4 we hear the answer; we hear John the Baptist's confident faith. These two gospel readings are out of sequence for the life of John the Baptist, but liturgically the order is perfect: first the question, then the answer. (Remember that the daily office lectionary provides the narrative sequences—there

² On the traditional Western pattern of reading Philippians 4:4-7 as the epistle on the last Sunday before Christmas, see John F. Romano, *Joy in Waiting? The History of Gaudete Sunday*, *Mediaeval Studies* 72 (2010): 75-124.

each gospel is read in its own order—but the eucharistic lectionary pursues thematic sequences.) This slow steady pace moves us toward Christmas without any abrupt transitions.

The collect was first introduced in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and it weaves together the 1662 epistle and gospel (as well as the description of John the Baptist in Malachi 4). Note that Archbishop Cranmer's original collect for Advent 3, which is much shorter and emphasizes light and darkness, is included in the appendix of additional prayers on page 706.

H. W. Dobson remarks: "It is quite clear from the first words of the Collect and the last words of the Gospel (see Malachi 3.1) that we are to draw a parallel between John the Baptist and a Christian minister. Like the Baptist the minister is to be a man of faith, simplicity of life, and courage. We should pray that all clergy may show these qualities in their ministry" (*The Christian Year*, at 25-26). The Third Sunday in Advent usually precedes the Ember Days in December (the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday after December 13—see page xxv), and the Ember Days are a traditional time for ordinations (see pages 41-42). The Advent 3 epistle and gospel are especially fitting for these days.

The Sunday first lessons are Isaiah 25 and 26. Again judgment and salvation are mingled together, but where the note of judgment was especially pronounced in the Advent 1 and 2 lessons, now the note of salvation is gaining strength. That progression is fitting, because without an understanding of judgment, you couldn't see why you would need salvation.

In the Sunday first lessons there is a strong theme of reversal of fortune. God is "a strength to the poor," and he offers "unto all people a feast of fat things," but as for his foes, "he shall bring down their pride together with the spoils of their hands" (Isaiah 25:4, 11). The

anticipations of the Magnificat, and the resonances with the gospel reading, are unmistakable.

* * *

Mattins 1	O where are kings and empires now O God, our help in ages past Hark! the glad sound!
Epistle	Awake, awake, to love and work! Pour out thy Spirit from on high
Gospel	On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry Watchman, tell us of the night Prepare the way, O Zion! Arise, sons of the kingdom
Evensong 1	Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates Jesus Christ, my sure defense

ADVENT 4

The epistle is a series of short, epigrammatic statements from Philip-
pians, one of which is “The Lord is at hand.” That statement offers the
rationale for all the rest: joy, moderation, prayer instead of worry, and
the peace of God that keeps our hearts and minds. From the stand-
point of the writing of Philippians, the anticipation is of the second
advent. Yet in reading this epistle on the Sunday immediately before
Christmas, we are filled with joy in thinking of our Savior’s birth.

The gospel reading is squarely about the first advent. We again see
Jesus through the eyes of John the Baptist, but where there was un-
certainty in the Advent 3 gospel, now there is a resounding confes-
sion. Jesus is the coming one, the Lord whose way is being prepared

by his messenger (John the Baptist). The reference to Jesus as “that prophet” connects to the gospel for the Sunday next before Advent, where Jesus feeds the multitude and is acclaimed as “that prophet that should come into the world.”

It’s fitting on this last Sunday in Advent that the epistle and gospel are connected by a theme of proximity: “The Lord is at hand,” and “there standeth one among you whom ye know not.”

Note that the gospel highlights the baptism of John, preparing us for language associated with baptism in the collect and gospel for Christmas Day, which say we are “regenerate and made thy children by adoption and grace,” not by nature (“not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man”). Compare the exhortation at the start of the baptism service (page 272) and the thanksgiving after the administration of the sacrament (page 279).

The Sunday first lessons are Isaiah 30 and 32. Again the themes of judgment and salvation are interspersed. In addition, both of the first lessons have striking connections with the epistle for the day. The epistle promises that our hearts and minds will be kept by “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding.” According to Isaiah 30, “thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not” (30:15; compare 30:7). According to Isaiah 32, “And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places” (32:18; compare 32:2).

* * *

Mattins 1 The clouds of judgment gather
Be still, my soul
Comfort, comfort ye my people

Epistle	Rejoice, the Lord is king! Like a river glorious Joy to the world
Gospel	O come, O come Emmanuel Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding Come, thou long expected Jesus The king shall come when morning dawns
Evensong 1	People look east. The time is near Break, day of God, O break!

CHRISTMAS DAY

You may be surprised that neither the epistle nor the gospel tells the Christmas story. The Christmas story *is* read; the great prophecies from Isaiah *are* read. But those are in Morning and Evening Prayer. The epistle and the gospel proceed on a different line: they offer a theological and teleological understanding of the incarnation.

The epistle is Hebrews 1:1-12, which moves from many prophets to one Son, rapidly shifting from creation to the cross to the ascension and reign. It then contrasts the Son with the angels, and thus contrasts the new covenant with the old, which was mediated by angels (compare Galatians 3:19).

The gospel is the opening verses of the Gospel according to St. John. These attest the divinity and eternal preexistence of Jesus Christ, a theme that runs through both the epistle and gospel. That Jesus is God is the starting point—only then can the surprise of the incarnation be grasped.

More themes are shared by the epistle and gospel: the creation of the world by the Son, and the glory of the Son. But there are also pointed differences: the epistle ends by contrasting the Son and the

angels, while the gospel contrasts those who do and do not receive the Word.

Note that the gospel ends with verse 14 (unlike late modern liturgies, which tend not to use this gospel reading for Christmas, but when they do, they typically extend the reading through verse 18). Verse 14 lays stress on the fact of the incarnation: “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” That conclusion to the reading also gives a stronger emphasis to the immediately preceding verses that provide the reason for the incarnation: that those who believe would become “the sons of God.” In the words of Charles Wesley’s great hymn, “Born to raise the sons of earth; / Born to give them second birth.”

Besides the epistle and gospel, there are four proper readings for Christmas Day, as well as six proper psalms.

At Morning Prayer, the proper psalms are 19, 45, and 85 (page xxxiii). Psalm 19 may be surprising, but creation is a theme in both the epistle and gospel, and it has been emphasized throughout Advent with the use of the *Benedicite*. Moreover, the sun (verse 5) has often been understood as a reference to Jesus Christ, the bridegroom and the mighty one. Psalm 45 is the royal wedding psalm, and it has many references to Gentiles and the spread of the Messiah’s reign (and the last verse, like the last verse of the epistle, emphasizes that God’s work is everlasting). Psalm 85 takes all the themes of judgment in the Isaiah readings in Advent and gives the divine answer: “he shall speak peace unto his people and to his saints, that they turn not again.” There are also several links between Psalm 85 and the last verse of the gospel (for example, “that glory may dwell in our land” and “Mercy and truth are met together”).

The proper lessons for Morning Prayer are Isaiah 9:1-7 and Luke 2:1-14, the prediction and narrative fulfillment of Jesus’s birth.

At Evening Prayer, the proper psalms are 89, 110, and 132. These

choices may surprise you, but they are all very careful. All three psalms are about David and the promise of David's greater son. At numerous points they connect up with the epistle and gospel for the day. These points include not only the repeated references to the messianic king as David's son, the anointed one (compare the epistle), but also the references to the superiority of the messianic king over the angelic host (compare Psalm 89:6-8 and the epistle) and the astonishing conjunction of mercy and truth (compare Psalm 89:15, 25 with the gospel). There are also tonal differences between the three psalms, with an arc across the three. In the first, there is a long passage that presages Good Friday and Easter Even (89:37-48); in the second, there is war but triumph (110:5-7); and in the third, the movement is from "David and all his trouble" (132:1) to blessing and peace (132:14-19).

The Evening Prayer lessons are Isaiah 7:10-16 and Titus 3:4-8. The former is the prophecy of the virgin birth. The latter may be surprising, and it is uncharacteristically short for a second lesson. But it is a fitting conclusion to the day. Its themes include the joint operation of the Trinity in salvation, the contrast between salvation by works and justification by faith, and the theme of mercy (so prominent across the psalms for the day). The second lesson takes up the collect's allusion to baptism ("the washing of regeneration") as well as the collect's turn from salvation to sanctification (especially verse 8).

That last point about sanctification is characteristic of how the Book of Common Prayer handles the great days of the church year. Compare Good Friday, where most of the readings during the day are about what happened and how we should understand it, but then the second lesson for Evening Prayer turns toward the ethical implications of Christ's passion (1 Peter 2). Once again, we see that the eucharistic lectionary is less interested in simply presenting the narrative, which is

provided for in the daily office lectionary, but instead seeks to answer the question “so what?”

* * *

Mattins 1	I know a rose-tree springing It came upon the midnight clear The people that in darkness sat
Mattins 2	Hark! the herald angels sing Angels we have heard on high In the bleak midwinter
Epistle	We sing, Emmanuel, thy praise Angels from the realms of glory All praise to thee, eternal Lord
Gospel	O come, all ye faithful Savior of the nations, come
Evensong 1	The angel Gabriel from heaven came Silent night, holy night
Evensong 2	O little town of Bethlehem All my heart this night rejoices

EXCURSUS ON ST. STEPHEN’S DAY, ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST, THE INNOCENTS’ DAY

Because of the combination of fixed and movable observances, some years present conjunctions that occur rarely (a famous example is John Donne’s poem on the conjunction of the Annunciation and Good Friday, which occurred on March 25, 1608). In 2022, Christmas falls on a Sunday. That means the next Sunday is January 1, on which the

proprs for the Circumcision of Christ are used. The result is that the proprs for Sunday after Christmas Day (page 65) are not used in 2022.

You may find yourself wondering about the red-letter days that follow Christmas Day. Here is an excerpt on these days from Samuel L. Bray and Drew Nathaniel Keane, *How to Use the Book of Common Prayer* (forthcoming IVP 2023):

If you look after St. Thomas for the next red-letter day, you may be surprised, because the next collect is for the Conversion of Saint Paul (p. 208). But in between are three saints' days, Saint Stephen's Day, Saint John the Evangelist's Day, and the Innocents' Day. The Prayer Book puts the materials for these three days right after Christmas Day. The idea is probably that these days continue the celebration of Christmas, just like Easter Monday and Easter Tuesday continue the themes of Easter.

But your surprise will deepen when you look at what these days are about. St. Stephen's Day commemorates the first martyr, stoned to death for his witness to Jesus. And the Innocents' Day remembers King Herod's slaughter of the young boys when he was trying to kill Jesus. Isn't this Christmas? Why are we turning our eyes to these horrors?

These three days give us three vantage points to look at the Nativity. On Christmas Day, we see the baby Jesus through the eyes of his mother, reading that "a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:10); and that "she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). But on these three days we see Jesus from other perspectives.

On St. Stephen's Day, we see Jesus with the eyes of the first

martyr of the New Testament church, a man in the prime of life, who has just delivered a powerful sermon that stirs the hatred of his hearers. Stephen “looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55, in the gospel for the day).

On St. John the Evangelist’s Day, we see Jesus with the eyes of an old man, about 90, living in exile on the island of Patmos, remembering the life of Jesus and seeing the visions of the Book of Revelation (the second lessons at Morning and Evening Prayer). Both the visions of St. Stephen and St. John were by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55; Revelation 1:10); both saw Jesus as “the Son of Man” prophesied in the Book of Daniel (Acts 7:56; Revelation 1:13).

On the Innocents’ Day, we see Jesus with the eyes of infant children, young boys, victims of the blind hatred and fury of King Herod. They were killed not because of anything they had done, but because Herod was trying to kill Jesus. In the gospel for the day, we weep with Rachel “weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.” In the weeping of these forlorn and devastated mothers, at the loss of their sons, we cannot help seeing what will come for the Virgin Mary. Yet the reading for the epistle lets us see further. Just as St. Stephen and St. John looked into heaven, so we are taken into heaven in Revelation 14:1-5, and we see “a Lamb,” who “stood on the Mount Sion,” and with him are 144,000 saints, the redeemed, who “follow the Lamb” and have “his Father’s name written in their foreheads.” They stand “without fault before the throne of God.” With the church’s choice of this reading for the epistle, we are called to think of these youngest of martyrs, the innocents, as always with the Lord for whom they suffered. It is striking that one of the

psalms always read on the Innocents' Day is Psalm 139, which describes how God loved and fashioned each one of these children from the womb.

So these three days offer us three pictures, side by side, a triptych about the incarnation of Jesus Christ and what it means for us. Each picture depicts one of the three ages of man (a popular theme in Renaissance art). All three days put before us suffering. We are faced with the extremities of martyrdom, the loss of exile at the end of life, the loss of a child just beginning his life. These days teach us that the birth of Jesus does not transport us out of this life in which suffering and spiritual warfare are our constant companions.

Yet all three days urge us to see beyond our material and earthly surroundings, to catch a heavenly vision. What is the incarnation for? Where is it headed? What will happen to death? In the readings for these days, we have the answers. We see and hear our Lord, who says, "I . . . have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:18, the second lesson at Morning Prayer on St. John the Evangelist's Day). And with the eyes of faith we look from this beginning, the babe in the manger, to the final consummation of all things: "And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 22:3-5, the second lesson at Evening Prayer on St. John the Evangelist's Day).

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ST. STEPHEN'S DAY

The hymns of Christmas are appropriate.

Mattins 1	Lord, who shall come to thee Awake, my soul and with the sun
Mattins 2	Let us now our voices raise Guide me, O thou great Jehovah O render thanks to God above
Epistle	Holy Ghost, illuminator The Son of God goes forth to war Rise again, ye lion-hearted
Gospel	As birds their infant brood protect
Evensong 1	Ye earthly vanities depart Vain, delusive world, adieu O Lord, my God, I cry to thee
Evensong 2	Saint of God, elect and precious First of martyrs, thou whose name

ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST'S DAY

The hymns of Christmas are appropriate.

Mattins 1	Now thanke well our God We plow the fields and scatter
Mattins 2	Let all mortal flesh keep silence Rejoice, the Lord is king
Epistle	Of the Father's love begotten O Word that goest forth on high
Gospel	O Word of God incarnate

- Evensong 1 Rock of ages, cleft for me
 Jesu, lover of my soul
 Jesus paid it all
- Evensong 2 Jerusalem, my happy home
 Jerusalem the golden
 How lovely shines the morning star!

INNOCENTS' DAY

The hymns of Christmas are appropriate.

- Mattins 1 Commit thou all that grieves thee
 Come ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish
- Epistle Behold a host arrayed in white
 Who are these like stars appearing
 O what their joy and their glory must be
- Gospel Unto us a boy is born
 Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child
 All hail, ye little martyr flowers
- Evensong 1 Quiet, Lord, my froward heart
 Lord, that I may learn of thee

CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST

This feast day is on January 1, but its proper collect, epistle, and gospel are used through January 5 (see the rubric on page 68). The effect is to juxtapose the Circumcision and the Epiphany, and thus to stress their close connection: the first teaches that Jesus fulfilled the law and brought salvation to the Jews; the second, that he is a light to the Gentiles.

There are six proper readings for this day, two from the Old

Testament and four from the New. These readings have many themes, all related to the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament. The trend in twentieth-century lectionaries was to put less emphasis on the circumcision and more on the naming of Jesus. The 1662 lectionary retains the scriptural emphasis on circumcision, and, as you will see, it offers an incomparably richer theological and ethical starting point for the new year.

At Morning Prayer, the first lesson is Genesis 17. This is the narrative of the establishment of circumcision as the covenant sign. This is literal circumcision, and throughout the other readings there will be a back and forth between references to literal circumcision and to spiritual or metaphorical circumcision—to the entire dedication to God not only of the body but of the heart and soul. That interplay between the literal and spiritual senses begins in the second lesson at Morning Prayer, which is Romans 2.

The epistle reading is about salvation through faith for all people, the circumcised and the uncircumcised. It begins with a quotation from Psalm 32, and then quickly moves to the question of how Abraham was justified. The sequence in the Book of Genesis is critical: Abraham was justified by faith in chapter 15; he was not circumcised until chapter 17; therefore he was justified by faith without the works of the law. For Abraham's justification, and thus for ours, it is faith and not circumcision that is necessary and sufficient.

In just six verses, the gospel moves us from Christmas to the circumcision of Christ. It gives us shifts in perspective: from the shepherds, to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and back to the shepherds. But it ends with the focus clearly on Christ, who is named *Jesus*. That name is significant of course, and its meaning is given in the gospel that is read most years on the Sunday after Christmas Day (Matthew 1:18-25): he is called *Jesus*, for he will save his people from their sins.

By his circumcision, Christ was keeping the law. In the Litany the circumcision of Christ is paired with his nativity (page 32): “By the mystery of thy holy incarnation; by thy holy nativity and circumcision; by thy baptism, fasting, and temptation, Good Lord, deliver us.”

Note that beginning with the Circumcision of Christ and running through the end of Epiphany the gospel readings will move through the life of Christ in sequential order.

At Evening Prayer, the first lesson (Deuteronomy 10:12-22) teaches the need for the dedication of the entire self to God, the spiritual reality for which circumcision is a sign: in other words, circumcise your heart (verse 16). The ethical implications are then given, including care for the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger (i.e., the foreigner). This lesson also ends with a reminder of God’s blessing on Abraham and the fulfillment of the promise that he would make his descendants as innumerable as the stars of heaven, thus connecting with the first lesson at Morning Prayer and the epistle.

The second lesson at Evening Prayer is Colossians 2. It again stresses spiritual circumcision (“made without hands” in verse 11). But it is also stressing something related to the literal circumcision of Christ, his keeping of the law for us: “ye are complete in him” (verse 10). One implication is that we are not to fall into the trap of thinking that human commandments are needed to make us right with God (verses 16-23).

Across all of these readings two different themes emerge, and it is striking how apt they are for what in our secular calendar is New Year’s Day. One is entire dedication to God. This fits the interest many have in starting new habits and routines at the start of the year—a salutary desire for a new, better beginning. But the other theme is that Jesus has done it. He kept the law *for you*. The message of the feast of the Circumcision is not striving for self-improvement: you are complete in Christ.

* * *

Mattins 1 The God of Abraham praise
 Take my life, and let it be

Mattins 2 Awake, my heart, and render
 Out of the depths I cry to thee

Epistle My faith looks up to thee
 Jesus Christ, my sure defense
 Joy to the world

Gospel The ancient law departs
 Let thy blood in mercy poured
 What child is this
 How sweet the name of Jesus sounds

Evensong 1 O thou who camest from above
 I'll praise my maker while I've breath

Evensong 2 From eternity, O God
 We know that Christ is raised and dies no more

EXCURSUS ON EPIPHANY

Although Epiphany is a major feast in the Book of Common Prayer, in 2023 it does not fall on a Sunday, and so is outside the scope of these draft notes. Here is a paragraph about the Epiphany from *How to Use the Book of Common Prayer*:

There are three main biblical stories connected to Epiphany in the tradition of the church. One is the coming of the wise men, who are the first Gentiles to appear in the Christmas story. Another is the baptism of Jesus, when he is declared by the Father to be the Son of God (Luke 3:22). The third is the miracle at Cana,

when Jesus turned water into wine, which was “the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory” (John 2:11 NIV). The Book of Common Prayer makes sure all three of these stories are appointed to be read on Epiphany (one as the gospel, one as the second lesson at Morning Prayer, and one as the second lesson at Evening Prayer).

* * *

Mattins 1	Brightest and best of the sons of the morning Christ, whose glory fills the skies
Mattins 2	On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry Watchman, tell us of the night
Epistle	Hail, thou source of ev'ry blessing O Spirit of the living God
Gospel	As with gladness men of old From the Eastern mountains What star is this, with beams so bright Earth has many a noble city
Evensong 1	Hasten the time appointed How bright appears the morning star
Evensong 2	When Christ's appearing was made known Songs of thankfulness and praise

EPIPHANY 1

The gospel readings in the Sundays after the Epiphany move forward through the life of Christ, but with a perspective that fits the season: each vignette reveals him to be the Son of God. *Epiphany* is from the

Greek word *epiphaneia*, meaning “appearance, manifestation”—the point of this season is to reveal who Jesus is and that means for us.

The epistle readings have their own distinct pattern. On the first four Sundays after the Epiphany, they are drawn sequentially from Romans 12 and 13.

Despite their independent logic, the epistle and gospel sequences in Epiphany reinforce each other. As H. W. Dobson put it, drawing on Melville Scott’s work on the epistles and gospels: “Each Sunday the Gospel provides a ‘manifestation of Christ’; the Epistle shows how the special feature of the Gospel is reproduced in the Christian character, and the Collect turns the Sunday lesson into a prayer” (*The Christian Year*, at 52-53).

The epistle says “present your bodies as a living sacrifice,” instead of being “conformed to this world.” The body reference draws attention because of being placed immediately after Christmas, the Circumcision, and the Epiphany, our attention is drawn to the motif of the body. In presenting our bodies a living sacrifice, and not being conformed to the world, our pattern is the incarnate Son of God. As the gospel reading says, he “increased in wisdom and stature,” doing his “Father’s business.” And—to extend the literal embodiment of the incarnation to a metaphorical description of the church—we are part of that body. Being part of his body affects how we should treat other parts of his body (a theme developed in the Epiphany 2 epistle).

Note that when the reading in course from Romans 12 and 13 concludes, on Epiphany 4, the final verse will be: “Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour.” The epistle for Epiphany 1 begins with the greatest of all duties—our duties to God. (Compare the catechism on page 303.) And giving God his due is exemplified by the young Christ in the gospel, who had to be about his heavenly

Father's business, abiding completely (that, is for three days) in God's word, even to the exclusion of other ties and attachments (compare Matthew 4:4; Matthew 10:37; Luke 4:4; and Luke 14:26).

The Sunday first lessons are Isaiah 44 and 46. When juxtaposed with the epistle, Isaiah 44 implies a sequence of election, then self-offering: he has chosen and formed his people (Isaiah 44:2, 21, 24), who then offer themselves back to him in thanksgiving and praise. Both first lessons have a strong rejection of idolatry, and that has special significance when placed here in in the Christmas cycle of the church year. An idol is a false incarnation, an attempt to "embody" God in something other than Jesus Christ. And there is an asymmetry: God has formed his servant and his people, but his people are not to try to "form" him (44:10)—that happened once for all in the incarnation.

* * *

Mattins 1	Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult Love divine, all loves excelling Cast down, O God, the idols
Epistle	Spirit divine, attend our pray'rs O God, what offering shall I give
Gospel	The heavenly child in stature grows Once in royal David's city
Evensong 1	By cool Siloam's shady rill Alleluia! sing to Jesus!

EPIPHANY 2

The epistle and gospel continue the sequences from the previous Sunday. The epistle is the next eleven verses of Romans 12, with a theme on

the church as a body—how the gifts of the Holy Spirit are to be used, and how Christians are to love one another.

The gospel is the first miracle of Jesus, the turning of the water into wine at Cana. (This miracle is noted in the exhortation at the beginning of the marriage service—see page 313.) Note that this gospel reading is one of the three New Testament texts that are most prominently associated with the Epiphany in early Christian materials (the others are the visit of the magi and the baptism of Jesus). All three are read on Epiphany itself, with John 2:1-11 being read as the second lesson at Evensong. Here it returns but with greater emphasis as the gospel reading.

The last verse of the gospel gives two angles from which we can think about this miracle. The first is what it tells us about Jesus Christ: in this he “manifested forth his glory.” That fits the Epiphany season (remember the subtitle of the Epiphany is “the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles”). The second is how it challenges us to respond: “and his disciples believed on him.” This theme has been developing in the Advent readings and the red-letter days (the response in faith of St. John the Baptist, St. Andrew, and St. Thomas), and it will continue with the next red-letter day (the conversion of St. Paul).

The gospel describes the movement from water to wine, which has traditionally been associated with the new covenant and the coming of the Holy Spirit. That “good wine” given to the church is worked out in the gifts bestowed on each Christian by the Spirit (compare Acts 2:13 and Ephesians 5:18). In other words, the epistle illustrates what the good wine of the gospel reading looks like.

There is also a progression from the gospel to the epistle in the life of the Christian: from faith to love, the necessary fruit of faith (see the homily of justification, reprinted as appendix 1).

Finally, each reading ends with a potent observation about the

incarnation. The epistle ends with this exhortation: “Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.” Placed as it is here in the season of Epiphany, that exhortation inevitably summons to mind the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And the miracle is presented in the gospel reading as a condescension, a concession he made because his mother asked him to do it. Jesus underlines that the presenting matter, running out of wine, was hardly worth his attention—“what does this have to do with me?” (ESV)—and yet he transforms this apparently trivial thing into an allegory of his messianic ministry. And so in this condescension, this concession, we see his glory shining through. And so the gospel says: “This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory.”

The first lesson for Morning Prayer is Isaiah 51, which has themes of joy and song as well as themes strongly associated with Epiphany: the manifestation of God’s power, the Gentiles trusting in God. It also has references to wine, but in the sense of judgment, which offers a counterpoint to the gospel. The joy and the judgment are two sides of the same coin. The manifestation of the Son is joy and life to those who embrace him, but judgment and death to those who reject him. But the first lesson teaches this doesn’t fall out along the lines that would have been expected—the Gentiles are welcomed into the joy of the Lord of Israel when they respond with faith to Israel’s Messiah.

The first lesson for Evening Prayer will surprise you: Isaiah 53. It is read twice on holy days in the 1662 lectionary: the first is here, and the second is on Good Friday. It is also read on December 20 in Morning Prayer, as part of the reading in course through the Book of Isaiah. When Isaiah 53 is read on Good Friday, its point is clear enough: it is the prophecy of the crucifixion. But what is it doing here on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany?

The simplest answer is that the Sunday first lessons are giving us a

greatest-hits collection of the Old Testament, and right now the readings are from Isaiah (in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany), and so chapter 53 will certainly be read.

But there is more. The crucifixion—and the resurrection and ascension—are where the incarnation is headed. As T. S. Eliot said in *Four Quartets*, “In my beginning is my end.” And these are all there in Isaiah 53 (see verses 10-11). There is also imagery associated with the incarnation in Isaiah 53: the suffering servant is “a root out of dry ground” (compare the Advent 2 epistle).

There is also an interplay between chapters 53 and 51 that points to the conversion of the Gentiles: “Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (53:1). “My righteousness is near; my salvation is gone forth, and mine arms shall judge the people; the isles shall wait upon me, and on mine arm shall they trust.” (51:5).

But the fullest answer would include Isaiah 53 as a solution to what is otherwise an emerging paradox in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. We are sinful—this truth underlies the calls for repentance in Advent, for the new birth in Christmas, for faith in Epiphany. And we see throughout the readings from Isaiah a restoration, a return, as God will make Zion’s “wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord” (Isaiah 51:3). But how does that happen? If some of these pictures held before our eyes are full of sin, and in other pictures it is entirely gone, what happened to sin? Who or what will bear it away? . . . Enter Isaiah 53.

* * *

Mattins 1	Arm of the Lord, awake! O worship the King, all glorious above!
Epistle	Holy Ghost, dispel our sadness

	Awake, awake, to love and work!
Gospel	When Christ's appearing was made known
	Songs of thankfulness and praise
Evensong 1	Cross of Jesus, cross of sorrow
	Stricken, smitten, and afflicted
	O sacred head now wounded

EPIPHANY 3

The epistle continues the reading in course through Romans, and there is a clear progression from the preceding weeks. The Epiphany 2 epistle taught how love is to be worked out, especially within the body of Christ, while the Epiphany 3 epistle teaches about love to all. It offers universal altruism as a basic Christian principle: "no man," "all men," "all men." One can imagine an interlocutor responding—"Sure, all men, everybody, except for these persecutors of the church." And back comes the answer of St. Paul: "if thine enemy hunger, feed him."

(Note the same progression in the Litany at the bottom of 34: first a petition for those in need, "the fatherless children, and widows, and all who are desolate and oppressed"; followed by a petition for "all men"; followed by a petition for "our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers.")

The gospel is another manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God, and another response in faith to that manifestation. In the gospels for the Sundays after the Epiphany, this is the first time that response of faith has been by a Gentile.

Again the epistle and gospel are proceeding along separate tracks, but again there are points of contact. We are to do good to all, and to the degree this character is formed in us, it is only a reflection of the character of our Lord. One recipient of Jesus's healing in the gospel reading is ceremonially impure, while the other is in a Gentile house.

The theme of tearing down the barrier between the Jew and Gentile—one that began in Advent 2 (see epistle) and continued with the juxtaposition of the Circumcision and Epiphany—is continued in the gospel. Not only is the centurion a Gentile, but Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as a feast in which “many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.”

The Sunday first lessons are Isaiah 55 and 56. Isaiah 55 illustrates the response of faith, just like the gospel reading.

Isaiah 55 also continues the theme from the gospel that the blessings of salvation are extended to the Gentiles: “Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee.” This theme is continued in Isaiah 56, for God says “my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed.” All—including the son of the stranger, the eunuch, and the outsider—who will “keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant” will be brought in, so that “mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.”

Note the first lesson at Evensong, Isaiah 56, ends with mockery of the false shepherds who lead God’s people astray. This is in striking contrast with St. Paul, whose conversion is commemorated on January 25, and Epiphany 3 always falls immediately before or after January 25. There is also a poignant connection between the faith of the centurion in the Epiphany 3 gospel and the conversion of St. Paul, whose witness led to the conversion of members of the Praetorian Guard.

* * *

Mattins 1 Jesus shall reign
 O light of Gentile nations

	Great God of wonders
Epistle	Lord of glory, who hast bought us Blest be the tie that binds
Gospel	Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old Hasten the time appointed
Evensong 1	O for a thousand tongues to sing There is a balm in Gilead

EPIPHANY 4

The epistle is the final reading in the Romans 12 and 13 sequence that started with Epiphany 1. It is a central text about the Christian's relationship to civil authorities. At first glance that might seem oddly chosen for Epiphany. But it does continue the progression of thought in the epistle sequence, with a movement outward: giving one's self as a sacrifice to God, loving others in the church, living at peace with others outside the church, and now submitting to the civil authorities.

The concluding verse in this epistle reading is: "Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour." That sums up the whole sequence: rendering to God his due (Epiphany 1 epistle), rendering to other Christians their due (Epiphany 2 epistle), rendering to those outside the church their due (Epiphany 3 epistle), and rendering to rulers their due (Epiphany 4 epistle).

Note that this year there are four Sundays after the Epiphany, but the number is variable between one and six. If you know the date of Easter, the table on page xxvii will tell you how many Sundays there are. One implication is that you will not always go through the whole sequence of duties in Romans 12-13, but you will always get the First Sunday after the Epiphany, rendering to God what is God's.

The gospel has two miracles: the calming of the sea, and the healing of two demon-possessed men. Once again we see the revelation of Jesus as God, who commands the winds and waves, from the division of the waters in creation to the deliverance at the Red Sea. And he is the one with power over devils (the one, as Jesus elsewhere puts it, who has the power to bind the strong man and plunder his house).

The gospel reading also emphasizes the response of faith. Throughout Epiphany, the responses to Jesus have been variations on faith, from Mary pondering in her heart, to the disciples believing, to the centurion's faith. But now there is a division. The disciples believe, but the people in the city beg Jesus to leave. This theme of division anticipates what is ahead (the betrayal and crucifixion). And in years with five or six Sundays after the Epiphany, it leads into the gospel for those Sundays.

Tying together the epistle and the gospel is the idea of danger. As the collect puts it, God "knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright." In these dangers we need God to give us, again in the words of the collect, "such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations."

Within the gospel reading itself there is a progression of dangers, from the external (the sea) to the internal (the devils). Note that both external and internal dangers are highlighted daily in the second and third collects at Morning and Evening Prayer.

Note, too, that stormy seas and demon-possession are related: the sea is primordial pandemonium and the demon-possessed have a raging sea within them. Both are instances of destructive disorder. Both defy the divine order (contrast Romans 13:1: "Be subject unto the higher powers"). And yet—as these events reveal—both the sea and

the demons are subject to God. Thus these narratives manifest Jesus's divinity.

The gospel reading refers to the sea (used in Scripture for the Gentiles, the nations) and to a miracle done in a Greek region around Galilee. With this gospel reading, both typologically and geographically, we are among the Gentiles. That means there has been a steady progression in the gospel readings that fits the theme of manifesting Christ to the Gentiles: Epiphany 1, in the temple in Jerusalem; to Epiphany 2, at a Jewish wedding in Galilee; to Epiphany 3, still in Jewish parts of Galilee but centered on characters who are ceremonially impure and Gentile; to Epiphany 4, located in the sea and in Gentile territory. This movement tracks the same movement from the circumcision (in the temple in Jerusalem) to the Epiphany (the good news to the nations, represented by the magi).

The Sunday first lessons are the next two chapters of Isaiah, 57 and 58. Isaiah 57 returns to familiar themes of salvation and judgment, and particularly judgment against idolatry and sorcery.

But there is a twist. The Scriptures say that the righteous are delivered and the wicked suffer, but it is often the case in this life that we see the opposite. One might be tempted to make that very objection to the epistle for the day: St. Paul can say that the righteous need not fear the ruler, because he is only a terror to evil, but that very St. Paul was reportedly executed by the Roman emperor. Isaiah 57 gives two answers to this conundrum. One is to look forward in time: dying now, the righteous avoid calamity later (verses 1-2). The other is to look up: the humble are those with whom God will choose to dwell. Compare the theme of heaven in the propers for St. Stephen's Day, St. John the Evangelist, and the Innocents' Day.

Isaiah 58 takes the virtue of charity—exhibited by our Lord's rescue of the disciples and healing of the demon-possessed men—and treats

it as an essential characteristic of all who delight in God. Fittingly for Epiphany, the divine blessing is described in terms of light: “And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day.”

In some years, including 2023, this will be the last Sunday before Gesimatide and Lent, and it is striking that Isaiah 58 includes an extensive discussion of the fast that God wants (verses 1-8).

* * *

Mattins 1	Jesus, where'er thy people meet Before the Lord Jehovah's throne Built on the rock the church doth stand
Epistle	Christ, by heav'nly hosts adored God bless our native land
Gospel	Jesus, Savior, pilot me Eternal Father, strong to save “Away from us” the demon cried
Evensong 1	Where cross the crowded ways of life Attend, and mark the solemn fast

THE 'GESIMAS

The church year began with the Nativity cycle: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Now the second cycle, the Easter cycle, begins. This cycle includes Gesimatide, Lent, Easter, Ascension, and Whitsunday. As Robert Crouse put it, “the first cycle is about God’s coming among us in Jesus Christ, the second is about his work for our salvation.”

The beginning of this cycle is a set of three Sundays that have Latin names based on roughly how many days they are away from Easter:

Septuagesima (seventieth), *Sexagesima* (sixtieth), and *Quinquagesima* (fiftieth). Together, this pre-Lent season is called Gesimatide (the *g* is soft, so it sounds like *Jehz-ih-muh-tide*).

These three Sundays prepare you for Lent, and they have been observed since the time of Gregory the Great, when they seem to have been instituted during a period of great disasters and calamities in Rome. The collect for Septuagesima still bears the imprint of that history as it recognizes that we are “justly punished for our offences,” but prays to be “mercifully delivered by thy goodness.” (That contrast between “our offences” and “thy goodness” will be critical to the collect for Lent, and it is picked up in many hymns, such as Horatio Bonar’s lines: “Mine is the sin but yours the righteousness; / mine is the guilt but yours the cleansing blood.”)

Even though these Sundays have been observed in the West for more than 15 centuries, the so-called “liturgical renewal” of the late twentieth century abandoned them. The critics ridiculed the ‘Gesimas, saying things like: “It’s a preparation for a season of preparation!” But the Book of Common Prayer was wise to keep them. Not only are they absolutely essential preparation for Lent—as you will see from the propers—but they also reflect a deep psychological understanding: it takes time to orient ourselves to something new. The Prayer Book doesn’t spring Christmas on us all of a sudden—we prepare with Advent. But we also prepare for Advent with the Sunday next before Advent. The same principle is at play here: we prepare for Easter with Lent, but we prepare for Lent with the ‘Gesimas.

SEPTUAGESIMA

The epistle and gospel for Septuagesima are both foundational for how we think about Lent, but one is affirmative and one is negative.

The epistle lays out the positive case for Lent: if you want to train for mastery in running, you need to be “temperate in all things.” St. Paul’s analogy also helps us make sense of Gesimatide as a whole: If Lent is a marathon, Gesimatide is a warm-up. To avoid falling away, St. Paul says, “I keep under my body, and bring it under subjection.” This is the argument for the physical and spiritual disciplines of Lent—they are meant to help us better run the race God has marked out for us.

But there is a danger from this “spiritual workout.” The danger is that you’ll shift your focus to yourself—how many spiritual pushups have you done, how many spiritual miles have you clocked?—and think that you have now earned God’s favor. The gospel is squarely addressed to this error: all the workers in the vineyard received the same amount, because the kingdom is not about merit but about grace.

The Sunday first lessons are from Genesis. There is a very old Christian custom of reading Genesis beginning with Septuagesima (noted in Cranmer’s preface to the BCP—see page xiv), and one of the reasons is that we learn by reading of the patriarchs about the miseries into which we are plunged by sin, what Milton calls “the fruit of man’s first disobedience.” But the sins of the patriarchs will be coming in future weeks: for Septuagesima the Sunday first lessons are Genesis 1 and 2. (The custom of using the *Benedicite* in Gesimatide and Lent is noted on page 719; that custom means it is used as the canticle immediately after Genesis 1.)

Genesis 1 may strike you as inconsistent with the other readings for Septuagesima, but the story of creation is critical. All that God created is good. Why then are we surrounded by so much suffering? The collect for this Sunday says we are “justly punished for our offenses.” While it is unusual now for us to think of the struggles, suffering, and sicknesses of this life as punishment for sin, that’s precisely the teaching of the Prayer Book, which is simply following the teaching of the

Bible. We are not made to suffer—God made the world perfectly good. Suffering has its origin in the Edenic curse, the punishment for sin. That does not mean that a particular illness you experience is always the direct result of a particular personal sin that you could identify, but it means that you aren't supposed to, aren't essentially designed to, be sick or die. And that is a critical doctrinal insight with which to enter Lent, because otherwise we must say that the evil, suffering, and death that surrounds us is simply how things are and there's nothing to do about it. Genesis 1 tells a different story. God is good and his creation is good. Therefore we pray to be mercifully delivered by the goodness of God.

One other connection between the first lessons and the epistle and gospel is that we see God, the divine craftsman, as our model and exemplar. In our labors (our toil in training, and our work in the vineyard) we are imitating the one in whose image we are made.

SEXAGESIMA

Just as with the preceding Sunday, the epistle and gospel are not about the same theme, but they are a well-chosen pair of lessons about how to think about Lent. The epistle asks what you glory in. In other words, what do you boast about? Is it your accomplishments? No, St. Paul says, but glory in your weakness. Lent is not to be a season of self-exaltation and a sense of strength, but a season of sounding the depths of your own weakness and thus your need of God's grace by prayer (note the hinge between the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer in the catechism on pages 303-304).

If this Sunday's epistle is negative (warning against glorying in yourself), this time the gospel lays out the positive case for Lent. If we fill our hearts with the word of God, and keep it, we will "bring

forth fruit with patience.” By contrast, the unproductive soils represent conditions that the disciplines of Lent help us to avoid: falling in “a time of temptation,” or “choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life.” If we think forward to the gospel for Lent 3, when the unclean spirit leaves a man, but he is not filled with anything better, his end is worse than his beginning (see pages 94-95). The Sexagesima gospel offers a different vision: don’t just put away sins and hindrances, but be filled with something better. Let the word of God be implanted in your heart, and let it bear fruit, knowing that this happens not all at once, but “with patience.”

The Sunday first lessons begin the descent into sin and judgment that are one rationale for reading Genesis during Gesimatide and Lent: the multiplication of sin. The sins of the children of Adam and Eve bring the flood and, immediately following the deliverance of Noah and his posterity, sin spreads from them. Each lesson, Genesis 3 at Mattins and Genesis 6 at Evensong, shows that the consequences of sin are death. But each also contains a promise of salvation—the prophecy of the seed of the woman who would bruise the serpent’s head, the ark of Noah and the rainbow of God’s promise. And they also present a contrast: Adam heard God’s command and failed to keep it; Noah heard God’s command and kept it. That difference in response is an illustration of what it means to “having heard the word, keep it” (from the last verse of the gospel).

QUINQUAGESIMA

The epistle and gospel for today lay out two great essentials for Lent, and without these essentials, nothing that you do in Lent will have any positive spiritual significance. The first is love, or charity, which is the theme of the epistle. Here St. Paul teaches that all the acts of

sacrifice and self-abnegation that can be imagined, without love, are worth nothing.

The gospel reading presents a second (but theologically prior) great essential: faith. The blind beggar is healed not because of his self-discipline or self-denial, but because of his faith. That is the essential beginning. The good works (of charity) that Lent is supposed to cultivate in us are not a path to faith, but rather the fruit of faith (see the homily of justification that begins on page 654).

The gospel reading also emphasizes divine mercy (repetition of “have mercy on me”). That prepares us for the Communion service on Ash Wednesday, when we pray: “Thy property is always to have mercy; to thee only it appertaineth to forgive sins. Spare us therefore, good Lord; spare thy people, whom thou hast redeemed” (page 360).

The gospel reading also gives a preview of the path ahead, the goal toward which all of Lent will be tending: “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished.” The disciples “understood none of these things.” Will we read this with dramatic irony (that is, understanding what the characters in the story do not), or will we be just as unperceiving?

The Sunday first lessons are Genesis 9:1-19 and Genesis 12. The first is the story of the covenant given to Noah, while the second is the call and promise to Abram, as well as his lack of faith regarding God’s protection of him and Sarai in Egypt. In both we see the divine initiative in the redemption story and the faithfulness of God in spite of our unfaithfulness.

The Mattins first lesson emphasizes the divine initiative in salvation, and the goodness of God (as the Lent collect will say, he “hatest nothing that [he] hast made”). That in turn helps us to set Lent in a context of grace.

The Evensong first lesson reiterates this theme of divine initiative and human response: God calls Abram, and he sets out in faith (compare Hebrews 11). We again have an anti-Adam (unlike Adam, he keeps God’s command). And we have a return to the theme of patience, for he sets out on a long journey. But we also have a reminder that beginning well does not guarantee continuing well, for the same Abram who left home at God’s command will fail to trust God in Egypt. (Recall the Septuagesima epistle, and its concluding warning about becoming a “castaway.”)

One final theme ties together all of these readings: sight. In the epistle we see through a glass darkly; in the gospel the blind man sees the power of Jesus; in the Mattins first lesson God sees the rainbow; and in the Evensong first lesson Abram sets out in faith, not seeing it with the naked eye (Hebrews 11:1), “for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:10).

EXCURSUS ON ASH WEDNESDAY

This “Switcher’s Guide” is focused on the Sundays of the year, but the start of Lent is on Ash Wednesday. Here is an excerpt on this day from Samuel L. Bray and Drew Nathaniel Keane, *How to Use the Book of Common Prayer* (forthcoming IVP 2023):

Right after the ‘Gesimas comes the First Day of Lent. Its alternative title is “Ash Wednesday,” and that’s how it’s popularly known today. It is a fast day, and it is the only day in the entire year that has its own dedicated service, called the Communion (which means “threatening”). On this day the “seven penitential psalms” are read—Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143—which have been associated since ancient times with repentance and sorrow for sin.

And this day introduces the collect that is used all through Lent, tying the season together (page 87). The only other seasonal collect is for Advent, the other great season of preparation.

But what you won't find anywhere in the Book of Common Prayer on this day is ashes. In fact, for the great majority of the time since the Reformation, Anglican churches have never had ashes on Ash Wednesday. How could this be? The key is that special service called the Communion (page 353).

The Communion service starts with a set of searing curses for everyone who fails to keep the law (page 354). Next comes a short homily, which begins with haunting imagery of divine judgment, but then turns halfway through to extol the grace and mercy offered to sinners in Jesus Christ (pages 354-357). Then comes Psalm 51 (pages 357-359), David's great prayer of confession after he committed adultery and murder, a psalm that ends with the joy of the forgiven sinner. Then come more prayers (pp. 359-361), ending with blessing and peace. And what follows is then a service of Holy Communion.

The Communion and Communion services set the tone for Lent, and they do this by being really serious about sin and equally serious about forgiveness. When you leave a Communion service, you aren't walking out with the residue of ashes on your forehead, carrying on your face a reminder of sin or mortality. Instead, you begin the Lenten journey with the joy of the prodigal child who was lost but is now found and brought to the Father's table. And the collect used on the First Day of Lent (page 87) strikes all the keynotes of this season: God's great love for us ("who hat-est nothing that thou hast made"); his welcome for all penitent sinners ("who . . . dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent"); our request not merely for external reformation but for

the divine gift of a new heart (“Create and make in us new and contrite hearts”); our need of divine mercy (“worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness”); and God’s rich supply of that mercy (“may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness”).

So this is how a Prayer Book Lent begins, not as a time to beat yourself up to try to win God’s favor, but as a season for those who already know they are loved, for those who have already mourned their sins and have received the forgiveness of God. And if you start Lent this way, you’ll still give things up. It is, after all, forty days of fasting. But how you begin changes how you think about it.

And what about fasting? The Book of Common Prayer says to fast on the forty days of Lent, except for the Sundays in Lent, which are still feast days. All the feasts and fasts are listed on pages xxiv-xxv. (When you see the reference to the “even” or “vigil” of certain days, that means the day before – like Christmas Eve before Christmas.) What are you supposed to do on fast days?

The traditional ways of observing a Prayer Book Lent are with fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. For fasting, this would typically be abstaining from rich foods (such as meat), and taking the money that was saved and giving it as alms for the poor. For prayer, Thomas Ken, an English bishop known today for writing the Doxology, recommended the daily reading of the Litany and Psalm 51 as extra Lenten devotions. But the Book of Common Prayer does not prescribe exactly what to do, so the choice for how to observe Lent and the other fast days is yours.

However you keep the fast of Lent, remember to approach it in the spirit that the ‘Gesimas taught you. If you look back to the very first day of preparation, Septuagesima (page 81), you’ll see that the epistle reminds you that the point of self-discipline is to

persevere in the faith (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). And the gospel for Septuagesima is the parable of the workers in the vineyard who all received the same pay no matter how long they worked (Matthew 20:1-16). It is all grace, all the time.

If you would like to read more about the Communion service, including why it does not include ashes, see Samuel L. Bray, "Ashes in a Time of Plague," *Faith & Worship*, vol. 88 (Lent 2021), 48-64, available [here](#).

LENT 1

The gospel readings in the first half of Lent follow a consistent pattern: there is a conflict involving Jesus, and Jesus prevails. Then from this conflict and triumph there is drawn out a spiritual or ethical implication, usually one made explicit by the text.

The gospel for Lent 1 presents a conflict between Jesus and Satan, and our Lord triumphs over the devil's three-fold temptation. This is the central text for Lent as a season connected to the life of Christ, for it gives his example of fasting 40 days. Jesus prevails in this temptation by quoting and believing the word of God, and the reading concludes with Jesus stating the fundamental duty of man to worship and serve God alone. In other words, he fights against the devil with "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17).

Thus this gospel works on the same two levels as all the ones throughout Lent: Jesus prevails (here, his victory over Satan vindicates his claim to be the Messiah), with a lesson for our spiritual life (live by the word of God; worship and serve him only).

Note that the church year moves in a sequence from baptism to trial and fasting. That is, in Epiphany we remember the baptism of Christ (second lesson at Mattins on Epiphany), and then in Lent we

remember our Lord's struggle against the devil with fasting and prayer. That very sequence is recognized in the Litany, which refers to our deliverance by our Lord's "baptism, fasting, and temptation" (page 32). Moreover, the Prayer Book further underlines this sequence in the Public Baptism of Infants, in which the child is first baptized and then signed with the cross in order "manfully to fight under [Christ's] banner, against sin, the world, and the devil" (page 278). The child is equipped for that combat through learning the catechism (page 300).

The epistle presents the Christian life as marked by suffering, but also by hope. St. Paul found himself "as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." We are in this way like our Lord, as he is presented in the gospel reading (compare John 13:16)

The opening verses of the epistle connect with the Septuagesima gospel (working together with God, but also the priority of divine grace). The opening verses also connect with the homily in the Communion service ("now is the day of salvation").

The Sunday first lessons are Genesis 19:1-29, the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and rescue of Lot; and Genesis 22, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. These are some of the most dramatic moments in the Old Testament, and so they are naturally included in the "greatest hits" in the Sunday first lessons.

But there is more to their placement here in Lent. Remember that the reading of Genesis during Gesimatide and Lent is supposed to show us a kind of "rake's progress" of the corruption of sin, and of the divine punishment it receives. This has included the sins of Adam (Genesis 3), the contemporaries of Noah (Genesis 6), Abraham (Genesis 12), and now Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-29). Soon we will read of more sins: deceitfulness (Genesis 27), rape and violence (Genesis 34), and adultery and lying (Genesis 39). And note

that the kidnapping and selling of Joseph into slavery is the predicate for the chapters on Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 42, 43, and 45).

Taken together, these chapters from Genesis show many transgressions of divinely established boundaries, many imitations of Adam's original sin. After Genesis 3, the sins described almost always involve sex or violence or both. These chapters also show the maleficent variety of sin's consequences, from the individual's spiritual and literal death to the destruction of relationships and communities. And these chapters show a variety of differences in how God's judgment relates to sin—sometimes fast and immediate, sometimes tarrying for a while but then falling quickly, and sometimes slow and spreading. This kaleidoscope of sin and judgment is supposed to prompt us to repentance from every kind of sin, as urged in the homily in the Communion service (which drew on the imagery of judgment from many passages of Scripture, including Genesis 19: “snares, fire and brimstone, storm and tempest”).

There is another theme as well in these Sunday first lessons: walk by faith, not by sight. Repeatedly in the Sunday first lessons people go by what they can perceive with their physical senses (e.g., Eve seeing the fruit; Isaac, feeling the hairy arms of what he thought was his son Esau). In the lessons for today, the initial judgment on the men of Sodom is blindness, and Lot's wife is judged when she insists on seeing. But Abraham refuses to walk by sight. Against all odds, he believes the promise that God will make him the father of many nations. His willingness to sacrifice his son—his only son, the son whom he loves, Isaac (compare JPS 1917)—shows the depth of his faith in God's promise. We were prepared for this theme in Lent by the readings for Quinquagesima, which all emphasized sight.

Moreover, there is a contrast between the Mattins first lesson, where Lot chooses “the cities of the plain”; and the gospel, where Jesus

is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Lot turned from dwelling in tents to the promise of greater comfort and security in the city, but it was a false promise. Not only does the world promise what it cannot give, but it undermines what it purports to give.

Finally, the Lent 1 gospel offers Jesus as the great counterpoint to the human failure involved in both of these themes. He was tempted and yet triumphant. The new Adam was offered all the kingdoms of the world, yet he refused to take what he could see; he walked by faith in the word of God.

LENT 2

The gospel presents a conflict between Jesus and “a devil” (in contrast to “the devil” of the Lent 1 gospel). This conflict occurs in “enemy territory,” as it were – in the region of Tyre and Sidon, places associated in Scripture and ancient history with idolatry, demons, and child sacrifice. And there is a child at the center of the story, the daughter of the Canaanite woman. The Canaanite woman pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter, and as so often in the gospels, Jesus is at first seemingly estranged, but his words and works are meant to evoke a response of faith (compare, for example, John 11:15). The episode concludes with Jesus healing the woman’s daughter, thus triumphing over the unclean spirit. The spiritual or ethical lesson is the example of the Canaanite woman’s faith.

This emphasis on faith is present in at least one gospel reading in every season – the gospel for the feast of St. Thomas in Advent, the gospel on Christmas Day, the gospel for Epiphany 3, and the gospel for Quinquagesima. Placed here in Lent, a season of weakness and humiliation, this gospel reading emphasizes the humble dependence

of faith. This reading is one of the biblical sources for the prayer of humble access (page 261).

The epistle calls us to holiness as the will of God. In particular, it warns against giving oneself over to lust. The epistle concludes by reminding us that we have been given the Holy Spirit—in contrast to the unclean spirit of the gospel. Another point of connection: the epistle makes the conventional association of Gentiles with the breaking of God’s law (“even as the Gentiles which know not God”), a baseline that makes the Canaanite woman’s faith stand out even more strongly.

Note that the Lent 2 epistle and gospel continue the Lenten themes that were developed in the Lent 1 Sunday first lessons, namely a warning against sexual sin and a call to walk by faith. And the Lent 3 epistle and gospel will continue these themes, including a reminder that we must not only put away evil but also fill ourselves with good.

The Sunday first lessons for Lent 2 are Genesis 27 and 34. Both are squarely about sin and its destruction of human relationships. In Genesis 27, we have Isaac’s favoritism, Rebekah’s scheming, Jacob’s treachery, and Esau’s apostasy and vengeance. In Genesis 34, we have a Canaanite prince committing rape and the sons of Jacob extracting an extravagant revenge: the murder of all the men of the city. Again we get a tapestry of different kinds of sin, from sins of the spirit to sins of the flesh, from the “polite” sins of the Mattins lesson to the shocking brutality of the Evensong lesson.

Yet with this week’s Old Testament lessons, something has changed. Before, violence marked those outside of the covenant—the contemporaries of Noah, the Pharaoh (at least in Abram’s imagination), the men of Sodom. But now sin has worked its way into God’s covenant people, and one of the two murderers of the men of Shechem is . . . Levi. The import of that name would not have been missed by ancient readers of the book, and it should not be missed by us. The sin of the

father of all the priests of Israel underscores one of the themes of Lent: repentance is for everyone, old and young, rich and poor, people and priests. (Compare Joel 2:12-17, read as the epistle on Ash Wednesday.)

In both of the Sunday first lessons, there is a pattern of using other people as means for one's own advancement or preservation. This also develops a theme from earlier Sunday first lessons (compare Abram in Genesis 12 and Lot in Genesis 19:1-29).

Finally, note the contrast between Jacob in the first lesson at Mattins and the Canaanite woman in the gospel. Both are eager to receive something, and both get it, but their means could not be more different. One receives the healing of her daughter through humble faith. The other receives the birthright, but wrests it away through deceit, and with it comes untold sorrow.

LENT 3

The gospel again presents a conflict between Jesus and a demon, with a clear sequence from the preceding two gospel readings. The Lent 1 gospel has Jesus versus Satan, and Jesus prevailing against Satan's temptations, but he was playing defense, as it were. The Lent 2 gospel has Jesus on offense, but only against "a devil." Now the Lent 3 gospel has Jesus continuing his offensive against the supernatural powers of evil, but what he is doing is not simply the control of a single demon. Rather, his triumph is indicative of the fact that he has bound the strong man and is plundering his house.

The spiritual implications at the end of the gospel reading are right there on the surface: don't just put away evil, but fill yourself with good; and those who are truly blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it. That last implication is a developing theme in the Gesimas and Lent: compare the Sexagesima gospel about the good

soil, and the method by which Jesus prevailed over Satan's temptations in the Lent 1 gospel.

The epistle reading uses familiar biblical imagery for the Christian life – adoption as God's children, walking in the light, resurrection. Its middle section is devoted to a catalog of sins to spurn. This theme sets up the gospel reading: the epistle says to put away a number of different sins, while the gospel says not just to put away evil but to fill yourself with good.

Massey Shepherd notes: "The Reformers expanded this Epistle to include verses 10-14. This gives a theme of 'light versus darkness' comparable to the 'holiness versus uncleanness' theme of the preceding Sunday" (Massey Hamilton Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, 128-129).

The Sunday first lessons are both from the life of Joseph, Genesis 39 and 42. Ever since Sexagesima, the general tendency has been to pair a lesson that depicts someone succumbing to temptation with a lesson that depicts someone steadfastly following God. On Sexagesima, the fall of Adam and Eve is contrasted with the obedience of Noah. On Quinquagesima the faithfulness of Noah is contrasted with the weakness of Abram. On Lent 1, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot and his wife are contrasted with Abraham's faithfulness. An exception was Lent 2 – failure all round. But here we have a return to form: Joseph faithfully resists temptation in Genesis 39, while in Genesis 42 we see the spreading consequences of the sins of Joseph's brothers (and of Jacob himself).

Note that the Sunday first lessons don't really work all by themselves; they do presume some general biblical literacy. Never is that more true than here. There are two weeks of Sunday first lessons on Joseph – four chapters in all. But the Joseph cycle of Genesis occupies thirteen chapters (37-50). So about three-quarters of the chapters are

not read in the Sunday first lessons, including the selling of Joseph by his brothers. What are read are Genesis 39, which fits in Lent as an example of resistance to temptation (and an illustration of the exhortations in today's epistle), and three chapters that give the high points of Joseph's revelation of himself to his brothers. Genesis 42 is the first of those high points.

LENT 4

Although the Prayer Book calls this "the Fourth Sunday in Lent," various colloquial names have attached to it. These include "Mothering Sunday" (from the epistle) and "Refreshment Sunday" (from the gospel). In the propers for today there is a marked shift in tone.

In each of the last three Sundays, the gospel has presented Jesus in conflict with evil spiritual powers. Now the crisis is human need, specifically the hunger of the five thousand. This gospel and the following one will present Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecies and longings of the Old Testament.

Similarly, for the last two Sundays, the epistle has presented a contrast between the way pagans live and the way Christians should live. Now there is a shift to a different contrast – between the slavery of the Jerusalem below and the freedom of the Jerusalem above. That contrast will continue in the next week's epistle, where the imperfection of the blood of bulls and goats is contrasted with the sacrifice of Jesus.

In other words, where the epistles and gospels for Lent 1-3 have emphasized the contrast between good and evil, and called for vigilance and holiness; now the epistles and gospels are shifting toward anticipation of Good Friday and Easter, and contrasting the old covenant and the new, and declaring the freedom and forgiveness of the sons of God.

The epistle is St. Paul's famous allegory of the two Jerusalems, and

the spiritual lesson it concludes with is freedom grounded in being the sons of God. This is the goal of the incarnation (compare the gospel for Christmas Day).

The gospel is the feeding of the five thousand. But if this is your first year following the 1662 lectionary, you are in for a surprise. On three different Sundays in the year, the gospel is an account of the feeding of the multitude (Lent 4, Trinity 7, Sunday next before Advent). Most striking of all, on two of these Sundays it is the very same account, namely the feeding of the five thousand in John 6. Why?

Part of the answer lies in a textual difference. On the Sunday next before Advent, the reading starts with verse 5. Without any other framing for the miracle, the interpretation is given by the final words of the reading: “This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.” That point aligns with the day’s reading for the epistle, and together they present Jesus as the coming king and prophet, a perfect preparation for Advent.

But on Lent 4, the gospel reading includes the first four verses of John 6. Those verses give the miracle a Passover framing: “And the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh.” At first that may seem like an odd aside, but it signals how to think about the Lord’s provision in this miracle: just as in the Exodus, God provides for his people. It also signals the shift into the second half of Lent: the ascent to Jerusalem for the Passover, and for the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Finally, these four framing verses also underscore the call of discipleship. They note why the crowd followed Jesus, and implicitly ask why you are following him.

The Sunday first lessons are Genesis 43 and 45. Read in sequence with the previous Sunday’s first lessons, these chapters give the dramatic resolution to the story of Joseph and his brothers. But they also have numerous points of contact with the epistle and the gospel.

The theme of slavery and freedom dominates the Joseph story, including a reversal of expectations. Joseph's brothers, ostensibly free, are subject to him. Joseph, the former slave, is now a ruler. In this way Jesus is a type of Christ (Phil. 2:6-8, which is in the epistle for the Sunday next before Easter).

The connection between the Sunday first lessons and the gospel is striking, as Joseph and Jesus satisfy the hunger of the people. Across all of these readings – the epistle, the gospel, and the Sunday first lessons – we see the incredible bounty and rich and provision of God. That, too, is a Lenten theme, though it is sometimes easy to miss. Even though Jesus fasts for forty days in the gospel for Lent 1, remember that the gospel ends with a feast: “behold, angels came and ministered unto him.”

* * *

More to come!