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HOMILETICS

The Pericopic Lectionary

Here's the scene: The Lectionary Committee has finished its work of preparing a three-year cycle of proposed readings for the Lutheran churches in North America. The Liturgical Text Committee at a meeting of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) has recommended the readings for adoption. A LCUSA newsman has seen the list and has prepared an article (which had "Lutherans may now read from the apocrypha" in its opening sentence), scheduled for release immediately upon the ILCW's taking action on the lectionary. The members of the ILCW note that alternate readings from canonical Scripture have been given in each of the eight instances where deuterocanonical readings had been selected. Discussion follows on the propriety of using readings from the deuterocanonical books as lessons for worship. The possibility of jeopardizing the entire project by insisting on these eight readings also comes into the picture. For pastoral reasons, the ILCW decides to delete the apocryphal readings and then approves the balance of the lectionary. Thus a new pericopic system is born.

This really is nothing new in the history of Christendom. The early church had inherited a system of regular lessons from the synagog service. According to J. H. Hertz,¹ the custom of concluding the reading of the Torah on sabbaths, feasts, and festivals with a selection from the prophets had grown up long before the destruction of the Second Temple. However, he points out that we "possess no historical data concerning the institution of these lessons." These lessons are known as the Torah and the Haftorah, the latter usually having some similarity or relation-

ship to the former.

To these lessons the apostolic church added readings from the New Testament. Justin Martyr (*Apology* I:67) calls attention to the readings from both testaments. The comment seems to indicate that there was no set order for the lessons—and, in fact, these might have been *lectio continua* readings rather than what came to be known as pericopes. The early fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* (8:5) speak of four lessons being read in the services—two from each testament—again with no indication as to the sequence that such readings took.

By the fourth century, however, some traces of fixed lections are to be found, for example in Chrysostom's assertion that Genesis is to be read during Lent. Other such traces are Augustine's claim that certain texts are appropriate to certain seasons and that no other texts might be substituted (such as the reading from Acts between Easter and Pentecost), and Ambrose's statement that the Holy Week readings are to include Job and Jonah. The so-called historic pericopes (also known as the standard lessons or the Epistles and Gospels of the Ancient Church) are supposed to have stemmed from the hand of Jerome in the fourth century. The source is presumed to be the *Comes Hieronymi*, whose authorship is debated by many modern scholars. However, the *Comes* is mentioned by name in a document dating from 471.² Internal evidence seems to point toward a late fourth or early fifth century date since the *Comes* contains no mention of saints canonized after Jerome's time and it calls Epiphany "The Theophany," a term which died out in western usage during the fifth century.

Yet further, in confirmation of the alleged authorship and the use of the above title in the *Comes*, it is to be noted that, while other Fathers associate different manifestations with this festival, S. Jerome alludes only to that of Christ's Godhead, the true Theophany, in the declaration at His baptism, "This is My beloved Son."³

¹ J. H. Hertz, chief rabbi of the British Empire, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), I, 20. It should be noted, however, that according to many authorities, the readings from the Pentateuch were forbidden about 165 B. C. by Antiochus Epiphanes. The rabbis substituted related materials from the prophets. When the Jews again became free, the Pentateuch readings were restored and the two readings continued in use to the present time.

² Jean Mabillon, *De Re Diplomata*, 6:482 f.

³ Herbert Mortimer Luckock, *The Divine Liturgy* (London: Rivingtons, 1889), p. 100.

The *Comes* provided for three lections, one from the Old Testament, one from the Gospels, and one from the other New Testament books.

During Carolingian times, this lectionary was revised by Alcuin.⁴ By this time the *lectio continua* principle had been abandoned as had also the use of the Old Testament lesson. W. E. Scudamore notes that:

A Gallican Lectionary of the seventh century is extant; but the tide of change had already set in from the direction of Rome, and half the Old Testament Lessons are "altogether wanting." In the ninth century, Florus, a Deacon of Lyons, mentions only "the reading of the Apostles and of the Gospels." A similar change began in Lombardy, though at a later period.⁵

During the Middle Ages, the lectionary became well-padded with legendary material from supposed lives of the saints. By the time of the Reformation, the lectionary was in need of repristinization. Cardinal Quignonius effected the first Roman reform in 1536 by deleting the legendary sanctoral matter.⁶ The Council of Trent's reform of the Roman lectionary was finally published in 1570 in the new *Missale Romanum* and remained essentially that church's official lectionary until the new *Ordo Lectionem Missae* of 1969.

The Lutheran lectionary reform in the 16th century took the form of a refurbished *Comes*-Alcuin pericopic collection. However, the origin of the various Lutheran Old Testament readings is not always certain, nor were the Lutheran reformers apparently concerned about having a unifying theme among the lessons of the day! There was, moreover, considerable indecision with respect to remaining with a pericopic system or returning to a *lectio continua* among 16th-century Lutherans.⁷ By and large, however,

the pericopic format won the day and the lectionary remained more or less established in the form that was inherited by Lutheranism in North America.

Pastoral concern in the 19th century caused various individuals and conferences to try their hand at developing additional series of pericopic systems for use in their own regions in Northern Europe and Scandinavia.⁸ In some instances these systems endeavored to retain the theme of the historic series—at times using parallel readings—but many of them departed from the themes which had traditionally been forced upon the *Comes*-Alcuin pericopes. These Old World systems also migrated to America and were the inspiration for more pericopic inventions in the New World (for example, the Synodical Conference series).

The desire for exposure of the worshipping congregation to greater amounts of Scripture has caused many Christian churches in the mid-20th century to give serious consideration to formal lectionary reform. Not the least influential in this movement has been the work produced by the Roman Catholics as a result of Vatican II. The resultant three-year lectionary restores to the church the Old Testament readings for every Sunday and major feast. Its readings are arranged according to two principles: an approach to a kind of *lectio continua* and a thematic approach (this latter ruling when the season sets forth a specific theme or stress). It restores the ancient reading of the Acts between Easter and Pentecost. It assigns one of the synoptic gospels for each year, filling in with lessons from John—yet John is about equally represented! Year A stresses Matthew, B Mark, and C Luke. "The Old Testament readings in this lectionary have been chosen primarily because of their relationship to the New Testament selections, especially the gospel reading."⁹

These Scriptural riches have caused Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Lutherans in North America to give serious consideration to adaptation of the *Ordo*

⁴ Francis Procter, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer*, rev. and written by Walter Howard Frere (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 466.

⁵ W. E. Scudamore, *Notitia Eucharistica* (London: Rivingtons, 1876), p. 242.

⁶ Evan Daniel, *The Prayer-Book: Its History, Language and Contents* (London: W. Gardner, Darton, and Company, 1881), p. 114.

⁷ Edward J. Mattson, "Pericope," in *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. Julius Bodensieck (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), pp. 1881–82.

⁸ E. Theo. DeLaney, "A New Lectionary for Lutherans of America?" in this journal, XLII (1971), 686.

⁹ *Lectionary for Mass*, trans. International Committee for English in the Liturgy (New York: Benziger, Inc., 1970), p. iv.

for their lectionary needs rather than to attempt independent pericopic ventures. In most instances where the *Ordo* uses selections from the deuterocanonical books, the Episcopalians accepted them; the Presbyterians have replaced them in all instances. Although the Lutherans have also replaced them in all instances with selections from canonical books, eight selections had recommended themselves as possible extra readings:

- Epiphany VI—Sirach 15:14-20 for Year A
 Pentecost VI—Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24 for Year B
 Pentecost IX—Wisdom 12:13, 16-19 for Year A
 Pentecost XVII—Sirach 27:30—28:7 for Year A
 Pentecost XVIII—Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 for Year B
 Pentecost XXI—Wisdom 7:7-11 for Year B
 Pentecost XXIII—Sirach 35:12-14, 16-19 for Year C
 Pentecost XXIV—Wisdom 11:23—12:2 for Year C

Reading these will convince one of the wisdom of Luther's position that, although not acceptable for use as Scripture, the Apocrypha is useful and good for reading.

Not all readings proposed for Sundays and feasts in the *Ordo* were accepted by the Lutheran revisors for the new lectionary. But unless good reasons could be set forth for changing, the *Ordo* was considered normative—this having been also the decision made by the Episcopalian and Presbyterian revisors for their lectionaries. In addition to the Sundays and major festivals, the Lutheran revisors prepared readings for the minor festivals and for a number of civil observances by the church.

The minor festivals have always been considered optional among Lutherans, their commemoration being observed or not according to local custom. However, the calendar has listed these festivals and commemorations for the convenience of worship leaders. In addition to the commemorations listed in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, the ILCW lectionary later to be released makes provision for including Mary the mother of our Lord on the calendar (why should Lutherans be omitted from the generations which shall call her

blessed—Luke 1:48!). Lessons are also provided for commemoration of post-Biblical saints under the categories of saints, martyrs, heralds of the Kingdom, renewers of the church, and renewers of society. Lessons are likewise included for three new categories of occasions: Christian unity, national holidays, and peace. Unlike the lessons for the Sundays and major feasts, the lesser festivals and occasions have only one set of lessons for use in all three years.

What are the advantages of the new pericopic lectionary over the one which Lutherans in North America inherited from the days of the Reformation? These seem to this writer to encompass the following gains: 1) restoration of readings from the Old Testament to the regular Sunday worship; 2) regaining the use of the Acts (and large portions of Revelation); 3) return to a kind of "in course reading" of various books of the Bible; 4) tripling the amount of Scripture regularly designated for reading in worship services; 5) enriching the worship themes also through an expansion of the calendar of commemorations and occasions.

In order to give worship leaders a better understanding of these gains, the ILCW has prepared a special booklet in the Contemporary Worship series (CW-6) which should be available from the three church publishing houses by this fall. It is styled somewhat along the lines of the Episcopalians' *Prayer Book Studies* 19 in that each Sunday and major festival will be assigned a separate page which will give the name of the day, the prayer (collect) for the day, lists of the lessons and the psalm(s) for the day, and notes about the color of the day (if applicable). In addition, the booklet will contain introductory essays for the two lectionaries (the three-year and the revised one-year) and for the calendar and the prayers. Indices will include a Biblical index for the one-year and for the three-year lectionaries, an alphabetical index of saints and commemorations (including brief biographical notes regarding commemorations not contained in the historic Lutheran festivals of Biblical saints), a topical index for the prayers, index of the Psalms for liturgical use, and bibliographical information.

Additional Remarks on the New Lectionary

We will have our tri-cycle before Christmas. "It's in the bag," the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship announces, and they will have it hanging at that place where you fire up your sermons in time for your Advent preparation. Whether you view the Commission as Jolly Old St. Nick, or just old, will no longer alter the fact; but whether you decide to accept the gift and use it at the altar is one of your fall decisions of more than usual moment.

Your decision is significant for the people you serve in your parish as well. Whatever possibilities for good lie in the use of the new lessons for each Sunday, their release depends in most cases on preacher's choice. There are no rubrics here. Rubrics are the one defense the nave has over against the chancel. The Lutheran Church has to varying degrees accepted the binding force of rubrics in chancel practice. But there has been no attempt made to set up rubrics to regulate relations between the pew and the pulpit. Liturgical custom has strongly suggested that the historic series of lessons be employed each Sunday for the Epistles and Gospels and for the Old Testament lessons. Liturgical custom has leaned definitely in the direction of urging that the Gospel for the day be expounded in the sermon. But preachers have generally operated on the principle that "no one tells me what to preach in my pulpit." This might well be the season of the year to instill a spirit of unselfish giving in the hearts of preachers—don't keep this tri-cycle to yourself; let your people have a ride. It really is their pulpit too.

The burden of this introduction to the new series is that in its use lies a tremendous opportunity for creating a new sense of life in the body, the church; a new eagerness to grow in the Word; and a new awareness of the significance of time in the Church Year. The multitude of new lessons suddenly lying about your study may seem at first to be without form, or even void; but as you shape them into sermons and Sunday themes and with the Spirit give them breath, they can increase the "living souls" that make up the brotherhood.

Take the sense of life in the body, the church, first. The historic series of lessons has been read and reread in most of our

churches since they were founded, and before that, of course, in the parishes from which the forefathers came to found them. Where that has been understood and appreciated, it has been a tremendous force for enabling Christians to realize that they are part of a body larger than their own organization. For many people and for too many preachers, however, the fact of the recurring lessons has been little more than a matter of convenience—"We want to use some lessons; why not these?" The introduction of a new series provides the opportunity—necessitates an approach—to convey an increased awareness of the fact that we are doing *the church's* liturgy each Sunday. These lessons need explanation in the light of the inter-Lutheran nature of their origin. But they will demand as well the clarification of the connection with the Roman Catholic three-year sequence (see *CTM*, November 1971, and the preceding article in this issue). They will readily suggest connections to the new lectionaries in the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ denominations. And they will Sunday after Sunday bring about thought on the comparable lessons that were used for so many years in the historic series. If the pastor capitalizes on the possibilities of making the church come alive as he introduces the new series, it will almost certainly pay off in increased interest on the part of his parishioners.

Take the new possibility for growth in the Word. The basis of the selection of the new lessons is primarily the desire to expand the exposure to the Bible. The three-year nature of the series is primarily the result of the fact that there are three synoptic gospels. The lessons are deliberately chosen to include as much of the New Testament as possible and to include supporting selections from as many books of the Old Testament as possible. It is true that experience warns that less than half of the members of a given congregation will be present to hear all the lessons all of the Sundays. But there will be many who will be led to a deeper study of Scripture as a result of this widened exposure. Many more will at least hear more Scripture than they have previously. And the remaining members can be helped to realize that they are missing something when they