

A Canon Within a Canon?

Have you preached on anything controversial recently? Have you covered Bible Readings that are politically incorrect? Have you spoken about taboo subjects?

You might not have done if you have been following the Revised Common Lectionary.

Now this is not one of those pieces on the lectionary which says "Why Oh why have they not included my favourite passage from Obadiah?", even though that book is excluded along with Nahum, Ezra and Chronicles, 2 & 3 John and Jude. Clearly it is impossible to include the whole Bible in a three year lectionary, and some things do have to be left out.

My concern is not with whole chapters and books that are missing, but with the odd verses here and there, which have been "chopped" perhaps because they are too uncomfortable for our modern delicate sensibilities.

So if you haven't read any passages which say "Wives submit to your husbands" recently, there's a reason for that. They appear in Ephesians, Colossians and 1 Peter. However, the lectionary studiously covers the passages before, and the passages after, whilst managing to avoid the contentious issue itself.

Or take the story of Elijah and the Prophets of Baal from the Old Testament. This appears on the Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year C when the reading is 1 Kings 18:20-39. We enjoy hearing how Elijah's God lights the bonfire, and how Baal is a big washout. However, the set reading finishes at verse 39 and the final part of the story (verse 40) is unaccountably omitted. Perhaps the compilers of the lectionary think that we are too squeamish to hear how Elijah had all the Prophets of Baal slaughtered in the Kishon Valley?

In the New Testament the sections which say "slaves obey your masters" are missing. The verses which exhort us to be subject to the rulers and authorities are not there. Paul's discussion of sexuality and "shameful lusts" in Romans, is carefully skirted.

Even in the Gospels, which as you would expect feature heavily in the lectionary, the condemnations denouncing Korazin and Bethsaida (Matthew 11:20-24 and Luke 10:12-15) are neatly excised from the surrounding verses, and the "woes" denouncing the Pharisees (Luke 11:39-54) are omitted altogether.

It is almost as if the creators of the lectionary are embarrassed that these "negative" passages can be found in the Bible and wish that they weren't there. It seems as though God's mercy is in, but God's judgement is out. They have kept the sugar, but avoided the salt.

As modern textual critics, the least we could say is that the people who put together the Revised Common Lectionary considered other material to be more appropriate.

If our congregations have pew Bibles, and are following the passages, it must seem strange that we are cutting out verses right in the middle of readings. I hope it does not give the impression that we have something to hide.

Instead, I think it is important that we should begin to preach on the "excluded Bible", the chapters and verses that are considered politically incorrect.

I am not advocating that wives should necessarily submit to their husbands. I *am* saying that we should not pretend that the Bible is silent on the subject. Those verses have been used in the past to justify victims of domestic violence staying in abusive marriages. Shouldn't we have something to say about that?

Nor am I saying that it is a good thing to go and slaughter the prophets of Baal. As preachers we often spend hours looking at the context of passages, so we ought be able to cope with a difficult verse here and there.

As preachers we don't always take the Bible literally, but we do take it seriously. And taking it seriously means that we allow the Bible to be difficult, and challenging, and sometimes politically incorrect. We need to let the Bible speak to us at is, rather than how we would like it to be.

To me, that means preaching from the whole Bible, not just a canon within a canon.

David E Flavell david@voteforjesus.co.uk

David Flavell is the author of "Vote for Jesus", a guide to preaching effectively.

If you would like to do your own research, and look for other "missing texts", then the Christian Research Institute website <http://www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/lectionlist.html> has an index of the lectionary organised by Biblical book.



The Word of God - Salt or Sugar?