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ARE WE SHORTCHANGING OUR PEOPLE?

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Those who were brought up on the services of the *Book of Common Prayer* may remember what a rich diet of Biblical fare they gave. At Morning and Evening Prayer there was guaranteed a reading from the Old as well as the New Testament, a Psalm (even if it was chanted badly) and either further psalms or Biblical canticles (except for the apocryphal one if in Lent it was the custom to sing the Benedicite). Admittedly it was not always possible to see the connection between the two lessons, but the lectionary was designed to work through the major themes of the Bible over the years. Clergy who went in for expository preaching would often construct their own lectionary for the passages on which they were preaching, and then use passages from the other Testament that would focus on the same theme as, or illustrate some aspect of, the ‘controlling’ lesson. The use of the two lessons also helped to underline the fact that both Testaments speak with one voice.

Other parts of the service such as the collects, confession and absolution, versicles, responses and prayers were also full of Scriptural allusions. Today many of these are omitted in order to make space for songs, many of which have either no or very little Biblical content – in some cases being explicitly or implicitly unscriptural.

While today we welcome the increased emphasis in many churches on expository preaching, it is sad that so often we find, even in those churches which would pride themselves on being Bible-based, that the Biblical content of their services is, apart from the sermon and often only one reading, totally minimal. While it is good to see members of the congregation using their gifts in leading the intercessory part of the service, their prayers do not often resonate with the Scriptural content of so many of the set prayers of former generations.

In a recent book written as a guide for today’s worship leaders* Paul Beasley-Murray quotes the Congregationalist Raymond Abba saying ‘In a full diet of worship all three Scripture lessons are necessary for an adequate setting forth of the Biblical revelation in Christian perspective. The Old Testament reading...tells of the preparation for the coming of Christ in the life and history of Israel; the Epistle testifies to the fellowship ‘in Christ’ of the New Israel; while in the Gospel the words and deeds of our Lord Himself are set forth’. This was, of course, the pattern in the services of the early church, and Paul exhorts Timothy to ‘devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture’ as well as to his ministry of preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 4:13).

Beasley-Murray goes on to say that ‘unless action is taken to remedy this situation, evangelicalism in many quarters may soon be facing a crises – a crises of the word’. He claims that for all the many other words heard in our services, the Word of God as heard in Scripture is scarcely allowed to speak. When so many in our churches are not committed to a practice of daily Bible reading, and so only hear the Word of God, and then in small measure, when they come to church, the seriousness of the crises begins to be seen.

Years ago the prophet Amos warns (8:11) ' "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord"'. Could that famine have already spread to our evangelical churches?

**Faith and Festivity* published by Monarch in 1991, ISBN 1-85424-136-2.

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