

In the beginning...

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WHEN LISTENING to a scriptural reading at Mass, it's natural to assume that the words are a translation

from the original texts of the Bible. But not all are. From time to time, we encounter a phrase at the beginning of a reading which has been added by a well-meaning editor, in an effort to ease the listener's way in to what is to follow. It's technically called an *incipit*, from Latin, literally "[here] begins", a term that's been used to introduce a manuscript since the fourteenth century.

Take "At that time", which introduces many Gospel readings. It's a rhetorical trick, useful in that it provides a sort of context for the chosen passage. It's not in the original text. Admittedly, it's not a very meaningful piece of context, but it does help those who have to read aloud, as its three-beat rhythm is easy to master, and it also helps listeners, giving them a moment to focus their attention.

It also adds a note of conversational familiarity, as we often begin a sentence with an introductory adverbial phrase when starting a story or connecting between sentences. "Once upon a time ...", "Long long ago ...", "In those days ..." The strategy is found in writing too. I used one in my opening paragraph. Did you notice? "From time to time ..."

The same thing applies to "Thus says the Lord", and its variants, in Old Testament readings. Another nice three-beat rhythm. In this case the phrase may



Adding introductory phrases is not always straightforward, 'Brothers and sisters' can work, but may not

well be present earlier in a passage. Isaiah 66 is a good example, used as the first reading for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C. The selected passage begins at verse 18: "For I know their works and their thoughts: it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come, and see my glory."

(I pass over the anomalous use of "For", which refers back to a context we aren't given. A sensible reader will omit it.) "Thus says the Lord" is used twice earlier, in verses 1 and 12, but not before verse 18. Nonetheless, in the text I heard read that day, that's how the reading began.

However, adding introductory phrases is not always straightforward. The second

reading that day is a case in point. It's from St Paul's letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 12, beginning at verse 5: "Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?"

The problem comes when an editor adds the phrase that often introduces a Pauline reading: "Brothers and sisters." That can work quite well, with its nod towards inclusivity, and it turns up well over 100 times in the letters. But on that particular day, it resulted in a weird sequence: "Brothers and sisters, have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?"

That's how it was in the version used in my parish on that Sunday in 2025. Sisters as sons? Unfortunately, I was the assigned reader in our church that day, and I puzzled over what to do to reduce the absurdity. In the end I went for "sons and daughters", but then had to manage the juxtaposition with the immediately following sentence, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord..."; and the rest of the extract, which is all about a son being disciplined by a father.

I wondered what other translations made of this passage, and found that some replace "sons" by "children", which to my mind makes easier the transition to what follows. But the message is plain: add extra context at your peril!

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