

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

Part 1 In the Beginning was the Word

“In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” is the sentence that opens the Gospel according to St. John. And this word is addressed to us. God’s word comes to us, in a continuing conversation with humanity, spoken through prophets, leaders and teachers of wisdom, as described throughout the course of the Old Testament, and then in an ultimately personal way in Jesus, the Word made flesh.

The presence of God’s word with us continues in the varied ways the Lord Jesus is present in and to his Body, the Church: in the liturgical assembly gathered in his name, in his word spoken through the words of Scripture, in the presence of the priest who presides over the gathered assembly, and in his Body and Blood received in holy communion.

The Bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council, reviving a more ancient understanding, sought to restore within the whole Church a renewed appreciation of the importance of God’s word. “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body.” (*Dei Verbum* Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 21). In particular, in the document inaugurating the reform of the liturgy, they decreed that “The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word.” (*Sacrosanctum concilium* The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 51)

Table of Word and Eucharist

“The table of God’s word”, the phrase used in the quotation above, goes back to one of the oldest ways of describing the two-part structure of the eucharistic liturgy, originating in the earliest centuries of the Church: the table of the word and of the Eucharist. At the table of the word we are nourished by the Scriptures just as we are nourished by receiving holy communion from the eucharistic table. As St. Jerome (ca. 347–420) observed: “The Lord’s flesh is real food and his blood real drink; this is our true good in this present life: to nourish ourselves with his flesh and to drink his blood in not only the Eucharist but also the reading of Sacred Scripture. In fact, the Word of God, drawn from the knowledge of the Scriptures, is real food and real drink.” (*Commentary on Ecclesiastes*.)

The Menu for the Table of the Word

Just like any festive meal, the table of the word offers several courses, as we know from our experience of Sunday Mass. The general pattern is that the first reading comes from the Old Testament, except in some special seasons of the liturgical year. The second reading is most often a selection from one of the letters of St. Paul to the various early Christian communities. The Gospel reading throughout most of the year offers a fairly continuous reading from either Matthew, Mark or Luke. The Gospel reading assigned for any particular Sunday has determined the selection of the Old Testament reading for that day.

But how were the readings chosen? Obviously, for the major feasts and seasons of the church year—Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter—the nature of the feast or season determined the choice of the Gospel passage, and the other readings were coordinated with it. For the longest segment of the liturgical year, Ordinary Time, the Gospel reading follows one Gospel narrative of the ministry and teaching of Jesus, cycling through the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, in the course of three years (2008's selection is from the Gospel according to St. Matthew). The theme of the gospel passage for a particular Sunday, is reflected in some way in the first (Old Testament) reading. However, the second reading, usually from the letters of St. Paul, is not necessarily connected with themes found in the gospel and first reading, since it follows on from week to week, going through the major sections of each of the letters.

(Part two of this series will deal with the selection of readings in greater detail.)

Our Place at the Table of the Word

Taking our place at the table of the Word is not the same as sitting down to listen to a lecture, or engaging in Bible study, even with a group of people. Our hearing the word takes place within the context of ritual, liturgical prayer. So the introductory rites at the beginning of Mass are designed to form us into a worshipping community, to gather a group of disparate individuals into one body, the Body of Christ in this place. We come together under the leadership of the priest presider, confessing our imperfect response to God's word, yet glorifying God for the wonder of his love, and praying, as a gathered community, to be open to the word addressed to us by this day's readings.

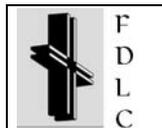
We do not just sit and listen either. No, we engage with the Word, in ritual dialogue with the readers and in sung response and silent, prayerful reflection. We respond with movement and gesture—standing in reverence and signing ourselves with the sign of the cross at the beginning of the Gospel, and the priest or deacon kisses the Gospel book at the conclusion of the reading.

Touched and refreshed once again by the announcement of God's love and power in our lives which has come to us through the readings and homily, we respond, first by re-committing ourselves to lives shaped by that faith, through the words of the Creed. Then taking seriously God's promise of salvation, we commend in prayer the needs of the whole world, through the Prayer of the Faithful.

(Part three of the series will explore this aspect of the liturgy of the Word more fully.)

The Year of Paul

Pope Benedict has proclaimed the twelve month period, beginning on the Feast of Peter and Paul, June 28, 2008 as the Year of Paul and encouraged all of us to attend more deeply to the teaching of the Apostle. The second readings at Sunday Mass are very often taken from the letters of St. Paul. In 2008 we began reading through the major sections of St. Paul's letter to the Romans in June. And then continued with the letter to the Philippians and will read the first letter to the Thessalonians before Advent begins. In 2009, after the end of the Christmas season, we will hear the First and Second letters to the Corinthians and then, when Ordinary Time resumes after the Easter season, the letter to the Ephesians



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