

Scriptural Basis of the Mass: Session #3: The Liturgy of the Word

Notes are written and compiled by Theresa Lisiecki



Introduction

So, we continue our journey in looking at the Mass and its basis in scripture. We have talked about sign, words and symbols and their deeper meaning. Last session we ended by looking at the Liturgical Calendar as an express way to live each year Salvation History and our faith, and a way of introducing the next leg of our journey -- the Liturgy of the Word. Please remember that our weekend readings are on a three year cycle and our week day readings on a two year cycle. And, as we discussed in the last session, our readings are also determined by the season of the Church calendar.

Just one more thought to remember before we look at each of the readings. **READ: Exodus 3:1-12.** Just as Moses knelt before the burning bush and heard the voice of God, our spiritual posture during Mass should be one of humility and intense interest as we hear God speak to us. The words from the Bible are not meant, (in our spiritual lives), to be "nice" stories, or interesting teachings, or filler for Mass so it lasts an hour. We sit before the throne of God and hear him speak to each one of us personally. The Word of God is meant to be alive, nurturing and challenging us as we seek to live as faithful people. I have said all too often -- Scripture is meant to comfort us in our afflictions of life, but it also should afflict us when we are too comfortable in life. All the more reason we need to prepare ourselves for Mass by looking at the readings before we ever get to Church. But this I have said before. God is fully present to us not only in the bread and the wine but in the words we hear in our readings from the Bible. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (the rubrics or guidelines for how to say Mass) teach: *When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel.* (#29) Think of it this way -- the lector or the Priest/Deacon lend their voice so that God may speak to us. So, let's take a look at the different elements of the Liturgy of the Word.

First Reading: As much as many of us would like to ignore what happens in the Old Testament or to say that the only important words are those of Jesus, all of scholarship throughout the ages, even Jesus himself would say that we cannot fully understand who Jesus was and what he did for us unless we know all of the stories of salvation history. This means we must listen, learn and study the Old Testament which is why the Catholic Church has us be attentive to it each week in the First Reading.

"God brought it about that the New should be hidden in the Old and that the Old should be

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manifest in the New. For, although Christ founded the New Covenant in his blood...still the books of the Old Testament, all of them caught up into the Gospel message, attain and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament...and, in their turn, shed light on it and explain it." 2nd Vatican Council Dei Verbum #16

Even Jesus Himself turned to the Old Testament to explain and expound on His death and resurrection. **READ: Luke 24:13-27.** In this passage Jesus has died and risen but has not yet ascended. These two men were leaving Jerusalem. Some scholars suggest we should see this as they are walking away from faith because it is too difficult to understand or live with. Jesus enters into their lives but in their own blindness they do not recognize Him. Jesus patiently listens to their "complaints" and concerns in the same way He listens to our endless shopping list of prayers; and only then does he try to put their lived experience into perspective by using scripture to explain all that has happened. And, interestingly, it is in the Eucharist, in the breaking of the bread that the two on the road to Emmaus recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

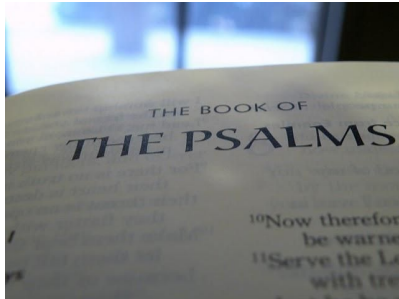
We listen and reflect on these ancient stories of faith from the Old Testament because they are important for our fuller understand of God's actions in the Eucharist, in our lives and in the world today. To ignore them is to ignore God's Word to us. Soon after Vatican II the Church through scholarship chose the first reading to give insight, understanding or contrast to the Gospel.

We end the First reading with the Lector making the statement: "The Word of the Lord". What is the response of the Faithful? "Thanks be to God!" This is meant to be a statement on our part, of our gratitude and joy that God has acted in history and speaks to us through this action. It comes from the ancient worship of the Israelites in the Old Testament. We are meant to have an attitude of thankfulness in all that God does for us. **READ: Colossians 2:6-7; 4:2.** The specific words *Thanks be to God* come from the letters St. Paul so we are repeating his words. **READ: Romans 7:25; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 2 Corinthians 2:14.** It is right and proper that we respond to the words from Scripture by showing our gratitude.

Responsorial Psalm: Our relationship with God is meant to be a dialogue in relationship in love. If this "thing" between us and God were one side then if God is doing all the talking we are nothing better than slaves, and if God silent to our constant banter than God is nothing more than a puppet. But what God has invited us to is a conversation or relationship. Since God just spoke we now need to respond. So after the First reading we reply to God through the words and prayers of King David, through a Psalm. The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 prayers or hymns created for David's private devotion and later used for public worship in the Temple. In Temple worship the psalms were most often recited/sung by two alternating groups or sides with a common refrain. In recent time scholars have tried to recreate the psalms themselves in the fashion of ancient use and that can be

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noted in some bibles by the editorial set-up or in the footnotes. (For newer editions of the Bible READ Psalm 124 or 129.) When we pray the Responsorial Psalm we are praying one of the most ancient prayers of our faith. While we might be only saying one line among many, our posture should not be to "veg out" while the cantor or musician is singing. We should be allowing the words to wash over us in prayer.

A word about why we offer our prayers, such as in the moment of the Psalm Response, in unison. It is not the intention of the Catholic Church that Mass be simply a moment of private devotion for those who attend. We come together weekly not only for our own growth, support and healing but we come as a statement to the world that Christ is still present in the world – through us, His Church. In the words of St. Paul we are *the body of Christ*. (1 Corinthians 12:27) As one body we sit together, stand together, kneel as one and respond in one voice. So, in this moment of the Responsorial Psalm the Church is helping us out by giving us a “script” so that our voices can be united.

Second Reading: In the context of our weekend Mass, the second reading always comes from the New Testament, from one of the Epistles (Letters), Acts of the Apostles or Revelation. As stated before, the First Reading and Gospel are always connected in some way. This second reading is most often independent of the other two readings and selected to give the faithful a basic overview of what is in the New Testament Letters. The intent, among many reasons, is to give direction as to who Jesus was/is for us and how we are meant to live as His disciples. **READ Ephesians 6:10-17.** The words of this reading and all the words of scripture are meant to fortify and strengthen us as we do battle with the secular world.

Alleluia: Now, we prepare for the climax of the Liturgy of the Word -- the Gospel. The Gospel is always taken from one of the four (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John) and contain the words and actions of Jesus. The first thing we do is we stand. Even today we recognize that standing is a sign of honor and reverence. We give a standing ovation at the end of an outstanding performance or speech. So too has it been for centuries. **READ: Nehemiah 8:5.** But we stand for another reason. For centuries

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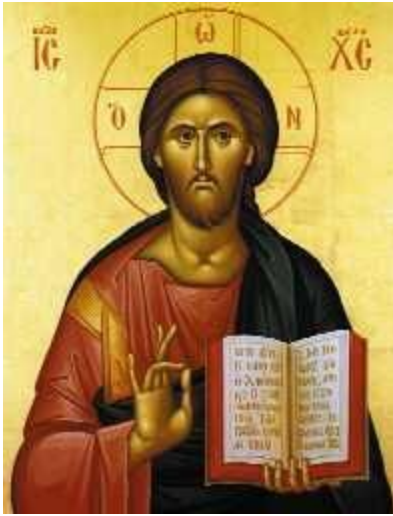
standing was a sign of the resurrection. The Jews in the Temple and Synagogues sit for their service. Early Christians would stand for much of their service as a sign that they were in union with Christ through His resurrection. In Europe many churches do not have pews because the congregation, the Christians in honor of being a resurrected people would stand throughout the entire Mass. Here in the US and in newer Catholic Churches pews have been added and we stand only at key moments. We stand at this moment out of respect and to greet the resurrected Christ in His words and teachings.

The word "alleluia" is sung or at the very least stated by the congregation. This is an ancient Hebrew expression of great joy meaning "Praise God!" or "Praise to the Lord!" We can find it in many of the Psalms (Psalms 104-106, 111-113, 115-117; 146-150) and it was used by the angels in heaven to sing praise to God. **READ: Revelation 19:1-9.** (Hallelujah is just a variation on the word Alleluia). Think in terms of the excitement a crowd shows when a long awaited champion or star comes into their midst. Think of the Ed Sullivan show when the Beatles were on for the first time. The teen age masses were screaming so loudly out of their excitement and joy that it was next to impossible to actually hear the Beatles sing. This should be the fervor and excitement by which we meet the Gospel and sing our alleluia.

The priest or deacon during the alleluia proceeds to the altar where the Book of the Gospel has been placed from the entrance procession. He picks it up and holds it high so that the entire congregation may gaze upon the Word of God high. Still elevated the priest or deacon processes to the Ambo (pulpit). During special seasons incense and candles are used to further show the solemnity and importance of this moment. We are about to hear God speak to us. The priest announces to the community "A reading from the gospel of...", then using his thumb, traces a cross upon the Word of God then moves to trace tiny crosses on his forehead, heart and lips (as the congregation does likewise). Quietly the priest prays "Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel." This action recalls how the prophet Isaiah was commissioned to go forth

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and proclaim God's word. **READ: Isaiah 6:1-9.** In turn the people trace the cross on their forehead, lips and heart as an act of personal consecration. Our prayer is that as we hear the word of God that it might always be in our minds, in our hearts and on our lips as we live our lives in faith.

Now standing we hear the priest or deacon proclaims the Word of God. I say again, these are not just ancient actions and words but God speaking directly to our hearts and lives. When I first got serious about being more attentive at Mass I remember being stunned by the reality that no matter what was happening in my life (Examples might be that I did poorly on some test; had a serious fight with a friend, won some award...) it was like the readings had been picked out that week especially for me. There is a message meant solely for our heart and lives, but we must prepare ourselves to receive it and then actively listen for it.

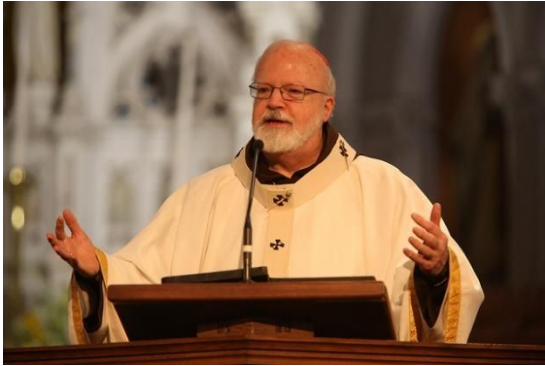
Gospel: Matthew 17:5, Hebrew 3:12-15. What more can we say. If we truly believe that God is in our lives and that through the words of the Bible are meant to lead and direct our faith, than the proclamation of the Gospel makes God present to us in a most profound way. We are not hearing about God but from God. And in the Gospel Christ speaks to us personally, to each and every one of us through these divinely inspired words. So, when we hear such things from the lips of Jesus as "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" (Matthew 4:7) Or, "*...your sins are forgiven*" (Mark 2:9), Jesus is speaking directly to us.

Homily: From the earliest days of the first Christian community, taking time to discuss and understand what was just read was important for the early community as it should be for us. The size of our communities preclude us from an active open discussion (can you imagine how long the Mass would go on if each Sunday we all got to ask questions and offer ideas). I did get such experiences when I was an undergraduate at a Catholic college in the late 70's. In our dorms we would have Masses just with

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our floor mates. Each floor had a Jesuit priest as the floor moderator and guide. On our floor a few times a week about 20 students would gather in Father Jay's room for a Mass. When it came time for the homily the priest would not only offer insights and ideas for our understanding and inspiration but he would ask for our responses and questions as well. I have to say this was when coming to Mass and the scriptures first started making a life-long impact on my life.



For the first time I realized that the homily was not just an opportunity to make a "to do" list for when I got home or daydream about some boy. I listened more intently so that I could enter into the conversation afterwards. As I said it is difficult for our large congregations to involve themselves in a dialogue homily but we should try to be as attentive as if we could interject our ideas or questions.

This rhythm of readings and then reflections was taken from the Jewish synagogues. Jesus himself took a moment to explain the scriptures when he read in his home synagogue of Nazareth. **READ: Luke 4:16-30.** As his ministry expanded he did the same in other synagogues throughout Galilee. (Mark 1:21, Luke 4:15.) The homily is meant to be an instruction for the faithful so that we can understand the readings and be directed in applications to our daily lives. The homily is **ONLY** given by an ordained minister at Mass, meaning deacon, priest or bishop. (Under special circumstances, such as at a special Children Mass (such as Christmas Eve) a catechesis can be given by a prepared lay catechist.) Why only an ordained minister? As successors of the apostles, the responsibility to proclaim and explain the readings was passed on to them by the Church through Christ. (Matthew 28:18-20.) While there are many qualified religious and lay leaders who have the background, insight and speaking ability, within the context of the Mass there is the desire or expectation of not simply passing on insight but the passing on of the Faith of the Church. By the way the Catholic Church no longer has sermons. Priests and Deacons are expected to only offer homilies. What is the difference? Sermons can be about anything. Homilies are to be about the readings.

One last word before we leave this topic. While it is our human nature to have our favorite priests, we should not organize our lives or make it a habit to only hear from them. Many parishes today only have one priest but in parishes such as ours, here at St. Colette we have the option of one of three

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priests on any given weekend. Everyone has their opinions, their likes and dislikes. The priests are rotated through the different Masses because it is important for us to hear each of them in the course of the year. Just because we don't like a certain priest does not mean they don't have something important to say that we need to hear. As a matter of fact it was often from the teachers I liked the least that I learned the most. So, I offer a challenge to those who structure their weekend attendance so they can always hit Father "So&So's" Mass. Rethink what you are doing. Are you listening for God's voice, God's direction or are you orchestrating your life to only hear what you want to hear. That said I understand better than most that not all ordained ministers have the same talents and gifts to proclaim God's words. But if we look, if we remain open even in the worst of experiences some nugget can be found. And even if there is truly nothing offered in the homily we show our willingness to practice of obedience.

CREED: Now that we have heard the voice of God speak to us through the readings and homily we take a moment of silence to allow God's Word to take root in us. In this silence we are meant to either reflect on what has just been spoken to us or to offer our praises for what God has just done for us. Which we do depends on each person. In the course of our experience we have spent an equal amount of time with each. After an appropriate time we stand and now profess our faith, our belief in that we are doing and who we are as Catholics. It is important to note that in one sense the exact



words of the creed are NOT taken from scripture. That said the truths of the Catholic faith always begin and find their expression from the scriptures. The "truths" we speak of here are the doctrines that define our faith of which many are found in the Creed. The elements of the creed are taken from scripture and in looking at the prayer as a whole it summarizes salvation history which is one of the core purposes of the Bible. One way to look at it is to say that it takes thousands of pages to say what we recite each time we recite the Creed.

It is also important to note that prayerfully reciting a creedal statement also has deep biblical roots.

READ: Deuteronomy 6:1-9. Within this passage is a prayer that the ancient Israelites continuing through to Jews of this day memorize and recite as a creedal statement. *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our*

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God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) It was/is recited upon waking, as one prepared for sleep and several times throughout the day. The concept of the one true God needed to be impressed into Ancient Israel's mind, heart and soul because the Jews were unlike every other nation of the ancient world. Everyone else was polytheistic, meaning they worshipped many different gods. The God of the Abraham, Moses and David's time was calling them to believe something different and therefore to become something different. The recitation of our creed at Mass and in the rosary is no different. While the modern world may profess a belief in one God they do not live as such. We recite the creed as a statement of who we are and what we believe but just like the ancient Jews. The hope is that we become what we say. Faith is a process that we must work at every day.

From the beginning of creation humanity has been invested in a battle between good and evil. The creed reminds us each week that not only has God entered into that battle but won it for us. Each week the Catholic Church draws the participants at Mass into, once again reciting this ancient prayer to



remind us that we too are invested in this battle between good and evil and that at the end of our days we will stand before God having already determined on which side we favor.

...the Creed assumes that there is a plot to life, and that we are here for a reason. It proclaims that the universe is not here by random chance, but was brought into existence by the one true God, "the maker of heaven and earth", and is moving in a certain direction according to God's plan. The Creed also presumes that this divine plan was fully revealed in God's Son, the "one Lord Jesus Christ" who "became man" to show us the pathway to happiness and eternal life... The Creed reminds us that at the end of our lives we will stand before the Lord Jesus Christ who "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead."

A Biblical Walk Through the Mass by Edward Sri

The desire of the Church is that we offer the words of a creed as not only a statement but our prayer with the hope that we will more and more surrender ourselves to its words, to its statements... to its TRUTHS.

(For those of you who are looking for the specific biblical references to the various elements of the Creed

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please see the handout for today.)

The Prayers of the Faithful: The Liturgy of the Word ends with the community gathering together to offer our prayers and petitions to the Lord. This element of offering prayers of petition is one of the most ancient parts of the Mass. Historically we can date the Prayers of the Faithful all the way back to 155 AD. Studying the works of St. Justin Martyr, scholars found an outline of the prayers and rituals of the second century church. (See end notes Catechism #1345) Today we pray not specifically for our individual needs (although there is the opportunity for that towards the end of these prayers) but for the needs of the Church Universal and of the world, both local and worldwide. **READ: 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Acts 12:1-10.** In the Prayers of the Faithful we turn our attention outward, out into the world because it is right that we do so. Let's skip to the end of Mass for a moment. When we are dismissed we are done so with the intent that we "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord". We are being commissioned to be evangelists to change the world. The prayers of the faithful is a training that our own interest should not be the center



and focus of our lives.

With these prayers we bring an end to the Liturgy of the Word. God has now spoken to us through the words of scripture and the words of the priest or deacon and hopefully we have been either convicted to live a life more worthy of the Lord, or we have been healed of mind or soul. We are now better prepared to receive Jesus in the Eucharist. Our next study begins our journey through the Eucharistic prayers. But before we leave this conversation...:

1. Is reading or studying the Bible important in your life? Why or Why not.
2. How do you prepare for Mass?
3. The statement was made that at the end of Mass we are being sent as *evangelists to change the world*. What are your thoughts on this statement?

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Catechism of the Catholic Church

1346 The liturgy of the Eucharist unfolds according to a fundamental structure which has been preserved throughout the centuries down to our own day. It displays two great parts that form a fundamental unity:

- the gathering, the liturgy of the Word, with readings, homily, and general intercessions;
- the liturgy of the Eucharist, with the presentation of the bread and wine, the consecratory thanksgiving, and communion.

The liturgy of the Word and liturgy of the Eucharist together form “one single act of worship”; the Eucharistic table set for us is the table both of the Word of God and of the Body of the Lord.

1348 *All gather together.* Christians come together in one place for the Eucharistic assembly. At its head is Christ himself, the principal agent of the Eucharist. He is high priest of the New Covenant; it is he himself who presides invisibly over every Eucharistic celebration. It is in representing him that the bishop or priest acting *in the person of Christ the head (in persona Christi capitis)* presides over the assembly, speaks after the readings, receives the offerings, and says the Eucharistic Prayer. *All* have their own active parts to play in the celebration, each in his own way: readers, those who bring up the offerings, those who give communion, and the whole people whose “Amen” manifests their participation.

1349 The *Liturgy of the Word* includes “the writings of the prophets,” that is, the Old Testament, and “the memoirs of the apostles” (their letters and the Gospels). After the homily, which is an exhortation to accept this Word as what it truly is, the Word of God, and to put it into practice, come the intercessions for all men, according to the Apostle’s words: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings, and all who are in high positions.”

1345 As early as the second century we have the witness of St. Justin Martyr for the basic lines of the order of the Eucharistic celebration. They have stayed the same until our own day for all the great liturgical families. St. Justin wrote to the pagan emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161) around the year 155, explaining what Christians did:

On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place.

The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits.

When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things.

Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves... and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation.*

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When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss.

Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren.

He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks (in Greek: eucharistian) that we have been judged worthy of these gifts.

When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: 'Amen.'

When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the "eucharisted" bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent.¹⁷¹

CREED

150 Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*. As personal adherence to God and assent to his truth, Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person. It is right and just to entrust oneself wholly to God and to believe absolutely what he says. It would be futile and false to place such faith in a creature.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

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