

Understanding the Mass: The Liturgy of the Word

I. Introduction to the Liturgy of the Word:

A. Four Presences of Christ at Mass:

Last week I noted the four ways Christ is present in the Mass. The first presence is when we gather as a community. This week we will focus on our belief that the Lord speaks directly to us through the person who is proclaiming the words from the scriptures.

B. Three Tables:

Focus is on first table, the Table of God's Word. The formal word we use for this table is "ambo," a Greek word that means, "little hill," derived from speakers in antiquity who addressed people from a place slightly above them so their voices would carry and be heard.

C. Attentive Listening is Critical:

"Which to you seems the greater, the Word of God or the Body of Christ? Right answer: God's Word is not less than Christ's Body. Ensure that the Word of God is not lost to your souls because you are speaking or thinking about something different. One who does not listen carefully to God's Word is no different from one who, through carelessness, allows Christ's Body to fall to the ground." (St. Augustine)

D. Importance of Memory:

We know how important our memory is. Without it, we become lost. We read and listen to Scriptures because they are the memory of the Church. They make the present intelligible and help us understand our own lives and interpret the significant events in our lives and our world.

Since we come to reconnect with God and Christ, knowing something of their and our history is important. Knowing others well means knowing something of their past. So too with God and Christ. This is one reason we read/listen to Scripture. By recalling God's relationship with people in the past, and especially God's presence and activity in the person of Jesus, we know something of who God is and understand God better as we continue to live with God today.

II. Overview of the Liturgy of the Word:

A. First Reading: The first reading, most of the year, is from the Hebrew Scriptures, what we also know as the Old Testament. These readings almost always have a connection with the Gospel.

B. Responsorial Psalm: Texts are taken from the Book of Psalms or Canticles from Scripture. Psalms and Canticles are song texts and so these texts should be ideally sung. A substitute psalm/canticle may be used when a musical setting is not feasible for the text assigned for the Sunday.

C. Second Reading: Does not necessarily connect with the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures or the Gospel. They are usually continuous from a particular book in the Christian Scriptures (New Testament), e.g., Letter to the Romans. Provides inspiration/direction in living faith today.

- D. Gospel Acclamation: Alleluia” means “Praise God.” It is a greeting of welcome by the assembly to the Lord who is about to speak to us. As an acclamation, it should be sung. During the acclamation, a book of Gospels is carried from the altar to the ambo as a visual way to tell us that the Gospel is a special part of God’s holy word, for it contains the words that Christ himself will speak to us as we hear the proclamation of the text. The triple sign of the cross on our foreheads, lips, and heart expresses our readiness to open our mind to the Word, to proclaim this Word with our mouth, and to safeguard this Word in our heart.
- E. Gospel: We stand for this text because these are Christ’s words to us. Standing is a sign of reverence and respect. Because the book being used contains Christ’s words for us, the clergy kisses the book at the conclusion of the proclamation as a sign of reverence and respect.
- F. Homily: The priest/deacon breaks open the bread of God’s word for the community. Because of the number of texts, he usually focuses on one text, often the Gospel. It is meant to show how God is continuing to act and speak among God’s people today. Catechumens and candidates for full communion may be sent forth after the homily to reflect on the Word of God since they are unable to partake of the Holy Eucharist yet.
- G. Creed: The Creed is known as the “Profession of Faith.” Having heard the life-giving Word of God, we give our assent of faith to what we have heard. The Creed contains our core Christian beliefs. Two versions of the Creed may be used, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed. We bow our heads as we say “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man” because the incarnation (becoming flesh, human) is the central mystery of our salvation. Without taking on our wounded human nature, Christ could not have redeemed it through his obedience to the Father and sacrificial act of love on the cross. As a recognition of this awesome humbling act of God, we bow during this phrase of the Creed.
- H. Prayer of the Faithful: The Prayer of the Faithful expresses our confidence in God who has just spoken to us and offers us an opportunity to voice the needs of the world to God as intercessors. The petitions focus on the needs of the Church, civil authorities, and the particular needs of the world, the needy, the sick, and those who have died. Our petitions represent our awareness of the larger world of which we are a part and in which we have a role to play. As a community of faith, we join in unison about our request by our invocation to God: “Lord, hear our prayer.”

RESOURCES:

- Johnson, Lawrence J. *The Mystery of Faith*, revised edition. Washington: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 2006.
- Searle, Mark. *Liturgy Made Simple*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981.
- Turner, Paul. *At the Supper of the Lamb*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011.