

The Mass (3)
Understanding How We Worship
The Liturgy of the Word

Last week I wrote a column about preparing to hear the Word of God. I noted the significance of beginning Mass by blessing ourselves, calling to mind the presence of God, acknowledging our need for God's mercy and forgiveness, giving glory to God who has saved us in Jesus Christ, and the Opening Prayer. The point I made was this: *before we can hear the Word of God, our minds and hearts must be cleansed of all sin*. A sinful people cannot hear God's Word with understanding. The purpose of the introductory rites of Mass, then, is to cleanse and prepare our hearts to hear God's Word. Today, I will be writing about the Liturgy of the Word and how we can participate in it more fruitfully.

The Liturgy of the Word has two parts: In the first part we listen to God's Word as proclaimed from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Writings of the Apostles and the Gospel. In the second part we respond to that word through the homily, the Prayer of the Faithful, and the Creed. This week, I will only focus on the first part of the Liturgy of the Word, which is structured in this way.

A Reading from the Old Testament

A Responsorial Psalm

A Reading from the Apostles

An Alleluia Verse

The Proclamation of the Gospel

First Reading: Apart from the Easter Season when it is taken from the Acts of the Apostles, the first reading is taken from the Old Testament. By reading from the Old Testament, the Church witnesses to the unity of the Word of God. The Old Testament is *not* obsolete. It is an authentic witness to Jesus Christ. If you listen carefully you will notice that the Old Testament reading is always related to the Gospel in some way, foreshadowing and pointing to Christ.

Psalm: After reading from the Old Testament we sing a portion of a Psalm. This responsorial Psalm is our response to the Word of God we have heard in the Old Testament. Again, if you listen carefully you will notice that the Psalm is related to the first reading in some way. Thus we respond to the Word of God in the First Reading by God's own Word as proclaimed in the Psalms.

Second Reading: The second reading is usually taken from the writings of one of the Apostles (Paul, Peter, James, John). It is not directly related to the first reading or the Gospel. It stands by itself. For example, this summer we will be reading from Paul's Epistle to the Romans for several weeks. While the epistles can be difficult to understand sometimes, if you make an effort to read and listen to them carefully, you will note how rich they are. In one way or another, they teach us how to live the Gospel.

Alleluia: Before the Gospel is proclaimed, we sing Alleluia three times, followed by a verse from scripture, followed by three other Alleluias. "Alleluia" is a Hebrew word that means "Praise God." Thus we sign praise to God before we listen to the Gospel. The proclamation of

the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. Although it is the priest or deacon who reads the Gospel, it is the Risen Christ who speaks through the Gospel.

Just as we are fed from the table of the altar by the Eucharist, so we are fed from the table of the Word during the Liturgy of the Word. The Word we hear is not any word, it is God's own Word, living and alive, that speaks to us even today. But for us to hear the Word, we must first listen to the Word in obedience with a pure heart. The next time you attend Mass, listen as attentively as you can to God's Word and ask yourself what the Word saying to you today. If you do this with a quiet and sincere heart, God's Word will nourish, change, and transform your life. For, the Word of God is Christ. *Father Matera*