

# The Ministry of the Lector: The fifth in the Lent-Easter series 'Good Liturgy'

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Roman Catholics have not generally been thought of as people of the word, that is, of the Bible. This has been considered one of the dividing lines between Catholics and other Christians for nearly 500 years. The past 30-some years, however, have witnessed a sea change in biblical familiarity among Catholics. This is mostly a result of the Scripture now enshrined in our own language throughout Catholic worship. For most of us, this word is experienced especially through the biblical readings proclaimed, preached and savored Sunday after Sunday during the Liturgy of the Word at Mass.

Contrast our present Sunday experience with the way it used to be. Formerly, the priest read the Scriptures first in Latin at the altar with his back to the people, and then in English at the pulpit. The readings were passages from the epistles and Gospels arranged in one set of Scripture readings that was repeated year after year. On Sundays a homily usually followed, but rarely did the homily have much to do with the Scripture passages just heard.

The present Lectionary for Mass must be viewed as one of the most remarkably effective achievements of the church in centuries. Through it the Catholic community as a whole now experiences the biblical word in corporate worship in a breadth and depth unknown for hundreds of years. Over the course of a three-year cycle of readings and psalms, we now have proclaimed and preached most of the New Testament and carefully chosen selections from the Old Testament, including the poetic words of the psalms. This prayerful communal discipline is forming us in ways we can only begin to imagine.

This worship experience has proved so winning that many of our Christian sisters and brothers in North America and other parts of the world now use an ecumenical version of this lectionary (called the Common Lectionary) for their Sunday worship. Among these communities are the Lutherans, United Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians and the United Church. It is wonderful that after centuries of division, we are in fact in union at the table of the word with these fellow believers. Who would have thought this possible even a few years ago? But the full flowering of this Spirit-inspired development is still before us.

## **A Sacramental Presence**

The power and significance of the biblical word at worship can be glimpsed in the early experience of the church. During times of persecution, lectors, or readers whose ministry was to prepare and proclaim the word at worship were among those local church leaders who were particular targets. The proclamation of Scripture was perceived by the persecuting authorities for what it was a powerful and galvanizing force for Christian presence and action in the world.

A renewed understanding of the importance and power of this liturgical ministry led to its restoration in our time. Providentially, this restored ministry has as its purpose to break open the far richer treasury of biblical readings now available to the Catholic people at worship. This is symbolized by the bound Lectionary itself. Over the centuries it had become part of the book of Mass prayers used by the priest-celebrant. (This development coincided with the gradual absorption of various roles in the liturgy by the ordained.) The ministry of the reader once again has its own liturgical book, as does the ministry of the priest-celebrant.

The deep significance of this ministry lies in its close connection with the contemporary recovery of a fuller sacramental understanding of our Catholic worship. All of us need to become more deeply immersed in the church's ongoing renewal of understanding of the word in that worship. Consider, for example, this observation from the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*):

*The church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred liturgy. (No. 21)*

In other words, there are two tables at Mass, the table of the word and the table of the Lord's body and blood. Together they constitute a single place of worship before God. And it is from each of these tables that we are fed, that we receive the bread of life. Implicit in this teaching is the understanding of the real presence of Christ now embraced by the church:

*For at the celebration of Mass, which perpetuates the sacrifice of the cross, Christ is really present in the assembly gathered in his name; he is present in the person of the minister, in his own word, and indeed substantially and permanently under the Eucharistic elements. (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, No. 7)*

It remained for the Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass to bring out the intimate and indivisible link between the Lord's presence in these two tables, that is, at the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist:

*As a help toward celebrating the memorial of the Lord with eager devotion, the faithful should be keenly aware of the one presence of Christ in both the word of God - it is he himself who speaks when the sacred Scriptures are read in the church and above all under the eucharistic species. (No. 4)*

## **The Word as Communion**

In this light we can discern in the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist something resembling the parallel rituals of proclamation and Communion. In both liturgies we show reverence for the presence of the Lord. These are perhaps more obvious to us in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, with bows, genuflections, kneeling, the showing of the eucharistic elements at the consecration, the deliberate and reverent extension of hands for the eucharistic bread and cup and the many other signs of reverence that individuals choose to make.

Consider the similar signs of reverence during the Liturgy of the Word: the solemn announcement of each reading; the reverent and avid listening to the proclamation of the readings; the special responses after the readings, especially the one following the proclamation of the Gospel that acknowledges the Lord's presence; and the other signs associated with the Gospel reading: the posture of standing, the Gospel procession with use of candles and incense, the sign of the cross made on the book and by members of the assembly and the final kissing of the book.

Consider next the similar ritual flow of the rituals of word and table. The Liturgy of the Eucharist achieves its center and high point in the eucharistic prayer, the solemn proclamation of God's saving deeds. In this proclamation bread and wine become the Lord's body and blood; and in the strength of this presence, the assembly offers prayers of intercession for the church, the world and the deceased and prays for the unity of the church. This solemn proclamation brings us to the breaking of the eucharistic bread and the pouring of the eucharistic wine, actions consummated in eucharistic Communion. In receiving the Lord's body and blood, we are made one with him and one another as food and drink for a world beloved of and longing for God in Christ.

In the Liturgy of the Word, the readings culminate in the solemn proclamation of the Gospel. This leads to the homily, a breaking open of the proclaimed word for the nourishment of the assembly. This Communion in the Lord, present in the word, is then extended during a period of communal silence, a time for savoring that word in the hearts of the assembly. Strengthened by this nourishment, the assembly then brings to the table its priestly prayers of

intercession for the church, the world and those in particular need.

## **Proclaiming the Word**

In this light, it becomes apparent that the ministry of the reader at Mass is pivotal to the whole liturgical celebration. At stake is the experience of the sacramental presence of the Lord both in the word and Communion and with one another.

Effective proclamation of the word is therefore an intrinsic part of the whole celebration. Spoken communication is first of all a human reality, requiring the use of simple human skills. As was declared over 400 years ago at the Council of Trent, sacraments are for people, that is, bodily spirits destined for resurrected life.

To proclaim the biblical word at worship with little or no interpretive emphasis is just as misguided as to proclaim it with too much. Last year on the Third Sunday of Advent, I heard one reader render the magnificent passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians in an utterly deadpan way. I was appalled at the travesty of hearing, Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! delivered so dully. Interpretation is not a choice; it is inevitable. It begins the moment the reader steps to the ambo. The challenge is to bring to the reading the telling combination of prayerful, intelligent preparation as well as the unique personality and skill that each reader possesses.

Above all, the readers must understand and believe that they are performing a real ministry of presence and communion. They must accept that the Lord is active and present to the assembly through their proclamation, that the Lord longs to speak and be heard in the biblical word they enunciate. It is a word for this assembly, here and now, and each of its members is called to hear and respond to that word today, this week, over the coming weeks.

By the words with which the reading concludes, The Word of the Lord, the reader invites the assembly to acknowledge the Lord's presence, as does the eucharistic minister with the words The Body of Christ. I recall the first time I experienced a reader make a real pause at the end of a reading and then, looking full at the assembly, announce The Word of the Lord with a gentle deliberation that made one feel invited to receive that word with joyful assent: Thanks be to God!

Further, as the church has long taught, in Communion we become what we receive. In receiving and celebrating God's word alive in our midst, we become the Lord's own presence and longing for a world better than the one we have helped shape. We become in Christ that transforming word to the world, the means by which it is transformed into what God intended from all time.

Lectors need to understand all this and more. When I have the privilege of forming readers for this ministry, I do not begin with the elements of public proclamation. Skills development is the last step. Instead, I invite them first of all to a deep and honest reflection on their own journey in and with Christ. As the Scriptures tell us, this is the Christ who became sin itself for our salvation. In other words, God in Christ has entered into the very brokenness of the great story that began in that first garden and that continues to unfold uniquely in each one of us. We need to bring all that we are into God's presence. It is our full human experience that God addresses in the Scriptures. Nothing must be left out. And all must be transformed.

So I try to help these ministers of the word learn how that word ministers first of all to them. But before turning to training in the skills of public proclamation, another critical formative step must occur. I invite them to imagine the personal stories of those to whom they proclaim this living word. They need only recall their own journey in Christ's ups and downs, its heartbreak, failures and unutterable longings in order to communicate this to those who look up expectantly at the announcement that this is A reading from ....

Hundreds of similar stories abound in the hearts and minds of those who struggle to hear the Lord in this word: children, parents, single people, straight, gay, lifelong Catholics, catechumens coming to Mass fresh and expectant, those who have lost those they love, those who have failed those who love them. To each and all, the Lord now

speaks a unique word, and the reader is God's chosen instrument in that very moment of its communication: The word of the Lord!