

From Fr. Jaspers

Homily: Liturgy of the Word

Today, we continue our homilies on the parts of the Mass. Last week we talked about the introductory rites and how they served to prepare our hearts for the liturgy by helping us to recognize who we are as the priestly people of God, the Mystical Body of Christ. Today we enter into the Liturgy of the Word, the first of the two principle parts of Mass (the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which are so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship.)

What is the Liturgy of the Word? In short, the General Instruction for the Roman Missal (GIRM) says, "When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his word, proclaims the Gospel." Let me say that again, "When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his word, proclaims the Gospel." It is really a beautiful dance between God and his beloved. As Song of Song says, "Listen, my beloved." The Lord speaks to us in the first reading and we respond to his voice with song. Then the second reading, unable to withhold our joy, we stand and burst into Alleluia. Then after the homily that helps us enter more fully into this dance of love and discover it in our daily lives, we stand again to declare our love, "I believe, I truly do. I believe in one God..." And having heard his voice of love, having retold our love story in the Scriptures and in the Creed, we confidently present our petitions to our beloved in the prayers of the faithful. So, let us take a few minutes to walk through this more slowly.

Having just finished the introductory rites, our whole self --heart and mind, spirit and soul—is ready to hear the word of God. Recently, a parishioner told me, "Father, I'm pretty self reflective all week, so when I come to Mass I look forward to God talking to me." Isn't it amazing the amount of times it seems the readings at Mass were chosen just for us and for what is going on in our lives? For example, maybe you've been struggling with anger and you get to Mass and the Gospel reading is when Jesus teaches us, "You've heard it said 'You will not commit murder,' but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." How did God know what we needed to hear? Maybe you've heard the saying before, "Coincidence is God's way of staying anonymous."

The truth is God is alive and well and wants to have a living and lively relationship with us. So it is no surprise that he speaks to our hearts at Mass. There is a great story from our faith of St. Anthony of the Dessert. As a young man he and his sister were left orphaned and received a large inheritance. One day when Anthony was walking by Church he went in and the reading was about the Rich Young Man whom Jesus told to go and sell all and then come and follow him. Anthony was cut to the heart and did just as the reading had said: he went and sold his thing and gave the money away, saving some aside for his sister. Soon after he stopped at church again and the reading that day was "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven." [Anthony knew what he must do, he placed his sister the care of some consecrated virgins and he himself left everything and

became a monk in the desert of Egypt. The Lord was speaking to his heart and through his response to the Word, Anthony has come to be considered the Father of Monasticism.

What is Jesus saying to you? What did he speak to you today? ... Were you listening? Sometimes we tune out don't we? It's important for us to practice good custody of the mind during Mass. (Sometimes we'll find we are thinking about friends and family and blessings and struggles; I invite you to bring those people and situations to the Lord in prayer. Other times we find ourselves thinking about trivial things like shopping lists and we should just cut those off.)

Preparing for the Liturgy of the Word before Mass is helpful, also. When I was in high school, I always got way more out of class when I had done the reading before class. Similarly, my mom likes to go to the opera sometimes, but before she goes she always reads a summary of the story so that she can really enter into the opera instead of trying to figure out what's going on. Sometimes the readings are a little complicated at Mass or are a continuation of a story or teaching, by taking time to read the readings before Mass, we are free, then, to listen for God's voice in the midst of the reading, instead of just trying to discern what the words are saying.

I find that when I do this the homily becomes more interactive also: I get excited when the priest says what I was thinking or I am surprised and say to myself, "I've never thought of it that way." Sometimes, I ask, "Why didn't he talk about x, y, or z?", which in itself becomes a reaffirmation of what God had spoken to my heart. And isn't that what's supposed to be happening during the liturgy of the Word?

Sometimes our insight, because of our life experience is a different one than the main message of the day. Main message of the day? Yes, there is one to be found, so let's take a minute to learn about the structure of the readings to help us. During ordinary time we read primarily from one gospel: In year A Matthew, year B Mark, year C?..yes Luke. John is read during the Easter Season and during year B because Mark is shorter than the others. Weekday Masses are on only a two-year cycle. Today I'm focusing on Sundays. During Ordinary time, the first reading is chosen to compliment the gospel reading. For example, today we had the miracle for the non-Jewish Syro-phoenician woman and the first reading talked about how someday all peoples, not just the Jews, would worship God.

If there isn't a prophecy fulfilled by Jesus during the gospel, the first reading has an Old Testament story with a similar theme. So when you're preparing for Mass look to see how the 1st reading and the gospel are connected.

The second reading is typically a sequential reading of an epistle. In some ways it is totally independent of the theme of the 1st reading/gospel, but other times it overlaps in theme, like it did today. (When we start a new letter in the 2nd reading, I suggest you sit down and read the whole letter all the way through to get a better sense of the whole letter so you

can better understand the part.) You can do the same with the gospel of the day too, reading the whole gospel or just what comes before the Sunday reading and what comes after.

The responsorial psalm is called responsorial because it is our response to the first reading, thus it also helps us to see the theme of the day. The psalms are the official prayer book of the church, so to speak. Jesus and the apostles prayed them, too. Can you think of one of the Psalms that Jesus knew by heart? Remember which psalm he prayed on the cross?... Psalm 22: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" In the responsorial Psalm, we pray to God in the very words he teaches us. One of Fr. Han's teachers used the analogy of a parent teaching a child: The parent says, "Ask nicely saying, mommy, can I have dessert, please." "Mommy, can I have some dessert, please." "Yes, you may." God teaches us too. In the psalms he teaches us to lament, adore, thank, plead, and praise. Today, we prayed, "O God, let all the nations praise you!"

Having listened to the first two readings we stand to sing God's praise, singing, "alleluia" which means, "Praise the Lord." You knew that, but didn't know that because it's what we sing during Lent in lieu of the Alleluia. You might really hit the You in allel-you-ia to help you say, "I Praise YOU Lord." We are praising him for the Word he has already spoken and because he is about to speak to us in a unique way through Jesus in the Gospel. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and God was the Word. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This same eternal Word who gives *all who believe in him the power to become Sons of God*, is about to Speak. Not Elvis, but Jesus has entered the building, so to speak.

"The reading of the Gospel [therefore] constitutes the high point of the Liturgy of the Word." Consequently, the book of the Gospels and the reading from it is treated with greater solemnity. If an alien showed up at Mass, it would say, "There is something special about that book. Look how they carry it and there are candles and the priest is incensing it too."

Before the reading of the gospel the deacon asks for a blessing and the priest prays, "May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips, that you may proclaim his Gospel worthily and well, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It is an allusion to when Isaiah didn't think he was worthy to proclaim God's word and he had a vision of an angel taking a coal from the altar of God and touching it to his lips to purify him. We then incense the gospel as a reminder that it is the presence of God the Word.

At the end of the Gospel, like the other readings, we praise the Lord for having heard it. "Praise the Lord," You can just hear an old grandma saying it to her grandson at having heard good news. Then, the deacon kisses the gospel and says, "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away." As we said last week, through our participation in the Eucharist we enter into the salvation and redemption of the Lord Jesus and our sins are wiped away. And Jesus said, "Rise, your sins are forgiven." Then having heard the homily, we do rise and we sing God's praise in the Creed. The singing part of it has been lost a bit since the shift to the vernacular, but the new missal has given us some arrangements in English. I remember when I was a kid my dad joyfully telling me about when he was in the 8th grade, "We knew

three melodies for the Creed!" We could have a whole class on the Creed--we actually did last Lent.

The current version of the Creed we use says, "I believe...", which is the translation of the Latin, Credo. One of the blessings of this is that it becomes an invitation for us to embrace our faith personally. There is something beautiful about the formula "We believe," but sadly many many people who prayed the Creed that way never made it their own. Let us hope and pray that the weekly declaration of "I believe" will help our kids to say the same in school and in the world. I'll never forget a late night TV host who one episode was joking about how the world is so confused and people and politicians don't know what they believe anymore, then he continued, but I know what I believe, "I believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth..." And he proceeded to recite the entire Nicene Creed right there on national television.

We know to whom we belong and his great love for us, and so we confidently present our petitions for the Church, for the World, for those in need, and for our Community. This is called the Universal Prayer, it is us praying, united as the mystical body of Christ, a royal priesthood. Each of us brings our own intentions with us, as we talked about last week, and carries them with us in our hearts, but at this time in the Mass we are praying for more than just our own needs: it is the people of God, as the Body of Christ, interceding for the world. The gravity of what we are doing, is highlighted by the fact that during Lent, it isn't until after the catechumens, who have yet to be baptized into the Body of Christ, are sent out that we make the prayers of the faithful.

What's happening during the prayers of the faithful? Jesus, through his mystical body, continues to pray for the World. Remember Jesus staying up all night praying to the Father or his interceding from the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." We, too, in the name of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit are praying for the Church, the World, those in need, and our community. Interestingly, in most of the Rites of the Church, these petitions are set in stone, which we catch a glimpse of in our Eucharistic prayers. But presently in the Roman Rite we can compose them ourselves according to the model given by the Church. The liturgy of the Word ends with our prayer in Christ Jesus and leads us into the Prayer of Christ Jesus—the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Sacrifice of the Cross.