

# The Liturgy of the Word

Whenever the Church gathers to pray the liturgy there is a proclamation of the word of God. In this gathering for prayer we gather in Christ, and in the word proclaimed it is Christ himself who speaks to us.

The way in which the word is proclaimed to us varies according to the particular form of liturgy being celebrated, but here we consider the arrangement of the liturgy of the word at Mass, and particularly at Sunday Mass.

## *A variety of readings...*

Each Sunday we hear a selection of readings and songs from the scriptures. These readings and songs are not random, but selected according to certain patterns, and published in a Lectionary, or Book of Readings. The same Lectionary is used by the whole Church. Where ever Catholics gather to celebrate Mass on a Sunday they will hear the same readings – it is a sign of our being in communion with each other, and of the Mass being not only the prayer of this local community but of the whole Church gathered together in common prayer. (There are rare exceptions – as for example during Lent this year, when some parishes will use the Year A readings, because they are preparing people for Baptism this Easter, and others, who are not, will use those of year C – but these simply prove the general rule).

## *...selected with care*

The key element of the Liturgy of the Word is the Gospel reading. During most of the year, Ordinary Time, the numbered Sundays of the Liturgical Year, other readings are chosen to complement this reading. For example on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday this year (7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C) the Gospel reading is Luke 6.27ff, where Jesus calls on his disciples to be compassionate to their enemies, the first reading and the psalm have been chosen with this in mind. The first reading is Samuel 26.2ff, where David shows mercy to Saul, his persecutor, and the Psalm is 102, and its response has us sing: 'The Lord is compassion and love.' The two options provided for the verse of the Gospel Acclamation also connect with the Gospel: 'Open our hearts, O Lord, to accept the words of your Son.' and 'I give you a new commandment: love one another, just as I have loved you.' The

second reading, during Ordinary Time, is selected independently, as we shall see below, and it is not intended to have any direct connection with the other readings.

During the principal liturgical seasons, Lent and Easter; Advent and Christmas, all of the readings and the texts for singing will have been chosen to present to us the spiritual character of the season. Thus on the First Sunday of Lent the **First reading**, Deuteronomy 26.4ff, speaks of the history of Israel as a people released by God from the horrors of slavery, and brought by Him to the promised Land. During Lent those preparing for Baptism at the Easter Vigil will make a similar journey, from slavery to sin to new life in Christ. And the all in the Church are invited to retrace their steps on this same journey, being renewed in Christ. Psalm 90 places on our lips a song for the journey, a song of confidence in God's present care for his people: 'Be with me, O Lord, in my distress'.

The **Second reading**, Romans 10.8ff, affirms the importance of the faith we profess At the Easter Vigil, the highpoint of the Church's year, those seeking baptism will make confession of their faith, before being washed in the life-giving waters of baptism. And the rest of the assembly will renew their baptismal promises. This reading serves as a *leitmotiv* for what is still to come.

The **Gospel Acclamation** prepares us for the Gospel account of the Lord's profession of faith during his Temptations in the Wilderness, Luke 4.1ff. Thus we sing: 'Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' During Lent we are encouraged to fasting, as a way of indicating, and learning, our need to rely more and more on the Lord as the ultimate source of our life.

The **Gospel** reading provides us with Luke's account of Jesus's temptations in the wilderness, and how he responded to each with the teaching of scripture. We have entered into the season of Lent, a season where we seek to pay particular attention to what tempts us from the ways of faithfulness, and during the Lent we pay particular attention to the teaching of scripture. The parallels are very clear.

What connects all of these readings and songs is the way that they engage us with something of

the quality of the season of Lent. They remind us of what we are to be about, and call us along with the whole community of the Church to new faithfulness in Christ.

So far we have looked at the readings of Sundays, looking at the way the readings and sung texts relate to each other. We have seen how in Ordinary Time the Gospel is very much the controlling reading, but in the Seasons all the readings need to be considered in their own right. It might seem from how we have looked at things so far that the readings for any particular Sunday stand as a unit alone, unrelated to the readings of the previous or following Sundays. That is not the case, far from it. There is generally a very close relationship indeed between at least the gospel readings for each Sunday, and in the case of the Sundays of the seasons, between all the readings of the season. The more conscious we are of these connections we are as we are preparing the liturgies, the more we can ensure that what we prepare can help others too recognise the way the continuity between our Sunday celebrations.

### Principles of selection of the readings and chants

#### *The Gospel*

To as great an extent as has proved possible the Sunday Lectionary has been organised on a 3 year cycle, each cycle drawing its Gospel readings from a single gospel – in Year C, this year, the readings are chosen from Luke’s gospel; in Year B, last year, they were taken from Mark; and next year, Year A, they will be taken from Matthew’s gospel.

In Ordinary time, the Gospel reading for each Sunday is usually simply the next episode in the particular gospel - this week’s reading follows on from last weeks, and next week’s will follow from this weeks. So for example this year, from the Third Sunday onwards we have heard a series of episodes from early in Luke’s gospel, from the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry starting at the synagogue of Nazareth with his proclamation of words of Isaiah: ‘The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me...’.

During the principal Liturgical seasons, the Sunday gospels will often be drawn, not from the gospel of the year, but instead from John’s gospel. We see an example of that in year A when on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Sundays of Lent, the

Sundays of the Scrutinies, where the John’s gospel provides us with great stories of conversion and enlightenment, which bring out the particular focus of Lent as a season for purification and enlightenment. John’s gospel is read also on all of the Sundays of Easter.

#### *The First reading*

As has already been noted the First reading is in one way or another linked with the Gospel, either because both are related to the season or, in Ordinary time, because the first reading directly relates to an aspect of the Gospel reading. Throughout the year this first reading is taken from the Old Testament. However there is rarely any direct link between the First reading of one week, and the First reading of the next week, so for example on the Third Sunday of this year the First reading was from Nehemiah, and on the Fourth Sunday the First reading was from Jeremiah. There is one exception to the practice of the First reading being from the Old Testament: during the season of Easter the First reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles.

#### *Psalm*

The Psalm has a different role in the Liturgy of the Word to the other selections from Scripture. It is less scripture read or sung to the assembly than it is a scriptural response from the assembly to the First reading. There is no regard paid to the sequence of the psalms. That Psalm is selected which will put on the lips of the assembly an appropriate scriptural response to the First reading. It also, and especially in Ordinary Time, serves to continue the work of preparing us for hearing and responding to the gospel. Although the singing of the Psalm is normally led by a psalmist, the assembly as a whole makes the song its own at least through the singing of the response.

It is sometimes felt to be difficult for a congregation, or indeed for the psalmist, to learn a new setting of a psalm for each week. For that reason the Church has provided a set of Common Psalms and responses (pages 949- 963 in Volume 1 of the Lectionary) to help parishes to continue to sing the psalm, even when musical resources are a little restricted, Thus a single psalm might be sung through the season of Lent, rather than there being a need a different one to be sung on each of the six Sundays.

### *The Second reading*

This reading is always selected from the non-gospel writings of the New Testament. During the Liturgical seasons the reading is chosen to present to us the spiritual character of the season. During Ordinary Time the Second reading over a number of weeks will be selected from the same New Testament book, for example this year the Second readings for the Sundays before Lent are taken from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

### *The Gospel Acclamation*

As has been seen above the verse of the Gospel Acclamation relates to the Gospel being greeted and acclaimed. The refrain – 'Alleluia', outside of Lent, and various alternate forms during Lent, for example 'Praise and honour to you, Lord Jesus' or 'Glory to you, O Christ, you are the Word of God' – should always be sung.

The singing of the Acclamation is one way in which we indicate the particular honour we afford the Gospel reading. We also demonstrate that honour when the Gospel book is brought in procession from the altar to the ambo, accompanied by candles and by incense. When there is such a procession of the Gospel, it is intended that the acclamation should accompany it. There are various ways in which the simple form printed in the Lectionary can be extended – examples are given in Appendix B.

## **Other elements to the Liturgy of the Word**

In addition to the Scriptural readings and songs, the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass includes three other elements: The homily; the Creed and the Prayer of the Faithful (General Intercessions).

### *The homily*

The homily is an important part of the Mass, a place where the community of the faithful can look for help in understanding how to apply the readings and the celebration of the Mass as a whole to their lives as individuals and collectively. The scripture readings and indeed the liturgy as a whole are intended to be accessible to people of every age and condition, but the homily has the task of increasing their impact by assisting the faithful to assimilate and apply them to their lives.

### *The Creed*

In the profession of faith the people respond and give their assent to the word of God heard in the readings and the homily. Before the mystery of faith is celebrated in the Eucharist, they recite together one of the official Creeds of the Church.

On most Sundays of the Year the Creed used is the Nicene Creed. During the seasons of Lent and Easter however the Apostles' Creed, the baptismal creed of the Church of Rome may be used. The Apostles' Creed might also be used at Masses with children.

### *The Prayer of the Faithful (General Intercessions).*

This Prayer was restored to the Roman Rite of Mass after the 2nd Vatican Council. In it the people of God exercises its priestly ministry of interceding for all humankind. Because 'the joy and hope, the struggle and anguish of the people of this age and especially of the poor and those suffering in any way are the joy and hope, the struggle and anguish of Christ's disciples,' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1) Therefore the Church prays not just for its own needs but for the salvation of the world, for civil authorities, for those oppressed by any burden, and for the local community, particularly those who are sick or who have died

It is right that the intentions proposed for our prayer should be quite concrete or particular in content, however they should always look beyond just the concerns of the local assembly to the needs of the whole Church and of the wider world. They are a sign of the communion of the particular assembly with all other assemblies and with the universal Church.

There is further guidance on the Prayer of the Faithful in Chapter, under the Ritual Focus note for Week 5 of *At Your Word Lord*, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent.

## Celebrating the Liturgy of the Word

There is further comment on the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word in the various Ritual Focus sections of Chapter 5. However it is sensible to offer here a few words of general orientation.

### *The role of the minister...*

Often when we consider the celebration of the Liturgy of the word our attention goes immediately to the role of the presider, the deacon, the readers, the psalmist, the other musicians and singers, and the servers. These all do have important roles, and they deserve our paying attention to how those roles are carried out.

However there is something which is of still greater importance, to which these various ministries are intended to serve, namely how the whole congregation being fed by the word proclaimed.

### *... and of the assembly*

There is need therefore not only to give careful consideration to how the word is ministered, but also how it is received by the congregation and how the congregation is helped then to engage with the word, and find nourishment there.

The Introduction to the Lectionary (paragraph 28) does not describe the Liturgy of the word simply as a proclamation of the word, nor as just a proclamation and a hearing of the word. Instead it speaks of the Liturgy of the word as a dialogue between God and his people. The expectation is that we will hear the word, and with our hearts, not just with our ears, and having taken the word to heart, we will begin to respond in prayer.

That prayer begins with the readings and psalm, is encouraged by the homily, finds expression in the Prayer of the Faithful and then informs the assembly's praying of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

In order for such response to take place, the Introduction to the Lectionary speaks of the need to ensure the Liturgy of the word is celebrated in a way which avoids rush and fosters meditation.

Ministers must prepare their readings so that they know and understand what they are reading, and give thought how as to how they will read it in order to effectively convey its meaning. It should be obvious from the way the minister proclaims the word, that this is a saving word, that it contains for us the message of eternal life.

It should be obvious also from the way that the minister takes care to make sure that that the congregation is able to properly hear the word. This is achieved in several ways – by pausing at the ambo as the congregation prepares to listen, rather than immediately launching into the reading; by reading at a measured pace, with pauses at appropriate places in the reading; by pausing after a reading to let the words begin soaking in, before inviting people to their acclamation of faith: This is the word of the Lord: Thanks be to God; and by ensuring that there are short times of silence between the different elements of the Liturgy. Such brief moments of silence make such a difference by enabling the assembly to take to heart what they have heard, to ponder on it, beginning to consider what it means to them, and beginning to respond to God in prayer. There is no reason to rush, after all we have come to Mass to listen, come here to pray.

The Liturgy Preparation team should give careful attention to making sure that there is no rush in the way the liturgy of the word is celebrated, and that there is established in the parish a proper and easy rhythm of celebration, constant from week to week, which can support the assembly's entering fully into this part of the liturgy. Where there presently is rush, where there is no established rhythm to the rite, these are not things that can be introduced to a parish overnight. There is a need for careful planning and preparation of the parish as a whole, as well as of the particular ministers involved. Learning new ways takes time. This season of *At Your Word Lord* provides a splendid opportunity for such preparation, as the whole parish is being invited to reflect again on the importance of the word of God in our lives in the Church.

## Practicalities

### *The training of ministers*

All liturgical ministers should be properly prepared for the exercising of their ministries, there should also be a regular programme which offers them the opportunity to further develop their skills and to reflect on the spiritual dimension of what they do.

Some of this formation and support will be provided in the parish or deanery, but rarely do parishes have the resources to supply all that is needed themselves. Further resources are available through the Diocesan Liturgy Commission ([http://www.rcdow.org.uk/pages/diocese/departments/diocese\\_liturgy.htm](http://www.rcdow.org.uk/pages/diocese/departments/diocese_liturgy.htm)), and from various Catholic and ecumenical bodies such as the Society of St Gregory ([www.ssg.org.uk](http://www.ssg.org.uk)), the Archconfraternity of St Stephen ([www.guildofststephen.org](http://www.guildofststephen.org)) and the National Network of Pastoral Musicians ([www.nnpm.org.uk](http://www.nnpm.org.uk))

### *Amplified Sound*

However well a minister of the word has prepared to proclaim the word, and however eager the congregation is to hear that word, all will be in vain if the sound system is not adequate to its task.

In most of the churches of our Diocese there is a need for the reader's voice to be amplified. Therefore readers need to be taught how to make the best use of the microphone system. It is also necessary to ensure that speakers are properly placed and the sound amplified sufficiently so that the congregation can hear.

Attention also should be given to the specific needs of the hard of hearing and the deaf. All parishes should have a loop system fitted for the benefit of those using hearing aids. There are many people who are hard of hearing who rely to a considerable extent on lip reading in order to assist their 'hearing'. This means that the reader's face should be properly lit. It is not uncommon for down lighting to be installed to assist the reader in reading the Lectionary, but without thinking of installing additional lighting to dispel the shadows the down-lighting produces on the reader's face.

Over recent years the Diocesan Deaf Service has been involved in training people to sign the readings and prayers of the Mass to assist the easier participation of members of the

congregation who are profoundly deaf. Details of the service they offer may be obtained from the Deaf Service on 020 7798 9026 (voice) or 020 7798 9150 (text)

### *The Liturgy of the word and young children*

It is now common in our parishes for a separate Liturgy of the word to be provided for younger children. However it is not always appreciated what it is that the Church seeks to offer and why.

What is intended to be offered is not a crèche, or play/activity time, but a Liturgy of the word specially adapted to meet the needs of children, so that they can understand the word of God as it is proclaimed to them, and be helped to apply it to their own lives and situations.

Guidance on such Liturgies is offered in *Liturgy of the Word with Children: Guidelines* available from the Liturgy Office of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales ([www.liturgyoffice.org.uk](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk); Tel: 020 7901 4850)

### *Liturgy Preparation*

As will have been seen above the Liturgy of each Sunday is linked to those of several other Sundays, either by the season, for example the Sundays of Lent, or by the fact that the Gospel and Second readings are selected on the basis of a semi-continuous reading of the same books over a series of Sundays.

In order to help this sense of connection come to the fore it is helpful to prepare not just one week's Masses at a time, but the Masses of a season, or a sequence of Sundays. Bringing out that sense of shape and connection can help the Congregation at a whole to relate one Sunday's celebration to the next. Preparing liturgies in this way can give people more of a sense of a journey through a season, or series of Sundays, rather than feeling that every Sunday is a completely fresh start, with little connection one to another.

Encouraging the parish to become more used to reading and praying with the Scriptures.

**Newsletter:** Many parishes find it helpful to print the reference to the Sunday readings in the newsletter. Putting the reference for this Sunday's and next Sunday's readings helps people who want to continue to find nourishment in one of these week's readings, and those who want to prepare themselves for the next Sunday's mass by

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looking at the readings in advance.

**Publications:** Publications such as Bible Alive can be a very useful resource for helping people to deepen their familiarity with the Bible as a whole, and to develop a more biblically based prayer life. ([www.bible-alive.co.uk](http://www.bible-alive.co.uk))

**Catechesis:** More and more parishes are finding that it is helpful to base their sacramental catechesis on the Sunday Lectionary. A model that many have found useful is described in . This model provides an opportunity for catechists, the priest presider/homilist, readers and other parishioners to come together to share the word together and find help from each other for their deeper hearing of the word. Further assistance in developing this way of working can be obtained from the Diocese's Department for Life Long Learning and Catechesis. (020 8202 3611)

**Short introductions at Mass:** Brief introductions to the readings, either at the beginning of Mass, or before each reading can be of great assistance to the congregation at large in helping them to hear the Word proclaimed. However considerable skill needs to be developed in writing these introductions, so that they do not 'swamp' the readings themselves, or become too controlling with regard to how the reading is heard by the assembly.

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