

# Preaching the Word

Reflections on Preaching drawn from *The Gift of Scripture*



## Scripture and the liturgy

In the liturgy of the Church we are drawn into a living communion with Jesus Christ, who reveals to us the love of the Father in the Holy Spirit, allowing us to share in the life of the Holy Trinity. In the Eucharist the Church never ceases to take the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful 'from the table both of the word of God and of the Body of Christ' (Dei Verbum 21). From the earliest days the proclamation of the Scriptures has been an integral part of the liturgy. Christ is present both in the word which is proclaimed and in the sacrament we share. The reform of the lectionary instigated by the Second Vatican Council offers a richer provision of biblical texts. The lectionary now includes a practically complete reading of each of the four gospels so that year by year we may come to appreciate the riches of each one. The lectionary also provides texts from all parts of the Old and New Testaments. Readings from the Old Testament have become a regular feature of the Liturgy of the Word at Mass after many centuries of comparative neglect. Such an abundant provision of biblical readings offers food for prayer and reflection and guidance for our Christian lives. We should be deeply aware of the importance of the Liturgy of the Word, taking part attentively from the beginning of the celebration and well disposed to hear the word (Introduction to the Lectionary 48). It is in the liturgy that we encounter 'the continuing, complete and effective presentation of the word of God' (Introduction to the Lectionary 4).

## Honouring the word

The word of God proclaimed during the Mass is honoured in different ways. Particular reverence is shown to the book of the gospels: it may be borne in procession by the deacon, it may be incensed, and candles may be carried to symbolise that Christ, who is heard as his

gospel is proclaimed, is indeed the light of the world. The custom of hearing the gospel standing is very ancient and of abiding significance. The books used in the Liturgy of the Word should be as far as possible worthy signs of the sacred word (Introduction to the Lectionary 35). It is particularly important that the place of proclaiming the Scriptures, the ambo, be stable and of appropriate dignity. It stands in close relationship to the altar and their belonging together should be indicated in suitable ways such as the design and material used (Introduction to the Lectionary 32). To assist people to hear and take in what is read the readings may be preceded and followed by appropriate periods of silence (Introduction to the Lectionary 28). The responsorial psalm, an 'integral part of the Liturgy of the Word', is designed to facilitate a prayerful response to the reading (Introduction to the Lectionary 19). The singing of the psalm may assist such a response. The 'alleluia' or verse before the gospel provides an opportunity for all the people to welcome the reading of the gospel, the climax of the Liturgy of the Word.

## The role of the reader

Great care must be taken in the proclamation of the biblical readings. Those who read are privileged bearers of the gift of God's word to the people of God. It follows that the reading of Scripture should never be undertaken in a hasty or offhand manner. The office of reader was prized in the early church of Rome. Given the richer provision of Scripture in our days, this role has assumed a renewed importance. We commend initiatives taken by dioceses, deaneries and parishes to provide preparation for readers, and to support their ministry with continuing formation and days of recollection. Such activities ensure the reverent and

intelligible proclamation of the Scriptures, so that the people of God may 'receive abundantly from the treasury of God's word' (Introduction to the Lectionary 45, Code of Canon Law 230).

### **The homily**

The Ethiopian on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza said to Philip: 'How can I understand unless someone guides me?' (Acts 8:31) The role of the preacher, whether bishop, priest or deacon, is to assist his brothers and sisters to understand and welcome the words of Scripture. The preacher is called upon to strengthen their faith in the word, to prepare them for a fruitful reception of the sacrament and to encourage them to embrace the demands of Christian life (Introduction to the Lectionary 41). The homily cannot provide a detailed explanation of all the biblical texts proclaimed. The central contribution of the texts should be set forth in order to stimulate the Christian response of individuals and communities. The depths of the text must be revealed by the preacher. He must not be content simply to moralise, to stress the obligations facing believers, or to speak of contemporary issues without shedding on them the light of the word of God. It is the preacher's privilege and duty to proclaim at all times the good news of salvation freely offered by God (Interpretation of the Bible IV.C.3). The preacher is above all a witness, who makes known to others the love and truth of God, which he knows in his own heart and from his own life of prayer and service (Code of Canon Law 767).

### **Other Liturgies of the Word**

It is not only at the Eucharist that the word of God is heard. At the celebration of each sacrament suitable readings are proclaimed, for 'Christ himself is the centre and fulness of all of Scripture, as he is of the entire liturgy' (Introduction to the Lectionary 5). The biblical readings nourish and challenge us as well as preparing us for a fruitful reception of each sacrament. Liturgies of the Word are also celebrated apart from the celebration of the sacraments. Such is the case when, due to the absence of a priest, celebration of the Eucharist is not possible. Liturgies of the Word in such circumstances, with the possible reception

of Holy Communion, maintain the contact of the community with Christ, the Word of life, and confirm the communion of the local community with the universal church. Liturgies of the Word are also celebrated to provide additional occasions for people to come together in order to receive Christ, the Word of the Father. Such celebrations, in church, in schools, in homes, or in other places where people gather, allow us to be nourished and strengthened by the gift of God's word for our daily living of the gospel.

### **The Liturgy of the Hours**

The Liturgy of the Hours, the prayer of the Church united with Christ, which has been rediscovered by so many people in recent times, is an extraordinary means of deepening our contact with the Scriptures. In particular, with its abundant use of the Psalter, the Liturgy of the Hours encourages us to turn our reading and listening to Scripture into prayer. Furthermore, the hymns and prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours are filled with the language of the Bible and with its symbolism (Interpretation of the Bible IV.C.1). Pope John Paul II has written about the Liturgy of the Hours in his Apostolic Letter for the beginning of the millennium, and calls all Christians to deepen their life of prayer (Novo Millennio Ineunte 34). In the Liturgy of the Hours education in prayer and deepening love of Scripture go hand in hand.

*The Gift of Scripture 74–79*

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## Some Questions for Discussion

1. Which three of the following words most accurately describe your expectation of preaching (if none of them do, what words would describe your expectation?)

Evangelisation	Catechesis	Interpretation	Justifying the scriptures
Encouragement	Consolation	Teaching	Entertainment
Explanation	Application	Translation	Warning or convicting of sin
Direction	Prophecy	Mystagogy	Exegesis
Commentary	Offering spiritual insights	Offering salvation	Empathy

- a. Why are these your expectation?      b. What are the consequence of this expectation?
2. What are your assumptions of your congregation's present knowledge of scripture?
- How would you hope to develop this through your preaching?
  - Through other pastoral/parish initiatives?
3. What resources does the parish provide to assist parishioners to deepen their familiarity with
- the Sunday readings?
  - the Bible in general?
4. What resources do you use to assist your reading of scripture/preparing to preach of
- the Sunday readings?
  - the Bible in general?
5. How would you judge the level of collaboration between the various ministers of the word (e.g. clergy, readers, psalmists, musicians) in preparing and celebrating the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass?
6. What opportunities exist for collaborative input in context of preaching/catechesis based on Sunday readings?

## Further Resources and Reading

### **In Communion with Christ.**

An all-parish resource intended to assist participants to a deeper appreciation of the nature and role of the Liturgy in the life of the Christian community. It contains substantial guidance on liturgical preaching.

### **Celebrating the Mass**

*Celebrating the Mass* is a pastoral guide to the celebration of Mass prepared by the Bishops of England and Wales and addressing the particular situation and needs of the Church in their dioceses. A companion to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, it is intended to assist people in their understanding of the Liturgy of the Mass. It was published by CTS in 2005.

### **Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass**

The first part of the Lectionary, this Introduction offers the general principles for the liturgical celebration of the Word of God.

### **Fulfilled in Your Hearing.**

A practical examination of the principal ingredients for effective homilies: the assembly, preacher, homily, and homiletic method.

- ◇ Details of how to freely download these documents can be found at [www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Scripture](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Scripture)