

The View from the Pew Part III: The Liturgy of the Word

Immediately after we finish the opening prayer for Mass, we enter into what is called the Liturgy of the Word.

The Liturgy of the Word comes with the Biblical readings. So this means the readings must always be from the Bible, and the readings change based on the day.

How do we choose the readings? It's changed over the years.

The earliest Christians simply would read whatever scriptures were available in their community. The first "lectionaries" were Bibles with notes in the margins telling the reader what to read on a particular Sunday, and these showed up by the fifth and sixth century. Mass readings had their own books by the 7th century. After the 16th century Council of Trent, we had what is called the Roman Missal where all the readings and prayers for Mass were contained.

Our current Roman Catholic lectionary goes back to 1970 created by a commission after Vatican II, and it follows a three-year cycle. Year A is the year of Matthew, Year B is Mark, and Year C is Luke. The Gospel of John is used each year at Christmas, Lent, and Easter, as well as to round out Year B, since Mark is short. An appropriate gospel passage is assigned for each Sunday of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. In Ordinary Time, the remainder of the gospel is read more or less in order, skipping over the parts read in the special seasons.

The first reading usually comes from one of the books of the Old Testament, but it can be the New Testament too, especially during Easter. There's often a link in theme between the first reading and the Gospel.

The second reading is from a New Testament letter, or Revelation during the Easter Season. During the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter, the reading is chosen for its particular content. Otherwise a letter will start on one Sunday and its major portions are read in order over the following Sundays. There are also readings for daily Masses that follow a two-year cycle, though sometimes readings overlap, especially on feast days.

In between the first and second reading is the Responsorial Psalm, which helps us to meditate on the Word of God and corresponds to the readings. It can be sung or recited.

Prior to the Gospel, there is an Alleluia sung or other chant during Lent. We do this to greet the Lord who is about to speak to us through the words of the Gospel. All partake in the singing or reciting of it.

One thing to think about during these readings is to just let them sink in. Sometimes it helps to follow along in a missal; others prefer to just hear the words. But what I find is

that even when I hear them four times over a weekend's liturgies, or hear familiar parables having been a Catholic my whole life, where I'm at on that day or in life will have something new speak to me. It could be a word or a sentence but there's always something that hits me.

Right after this is the homily. Each priest or deacon has a different style. In seminary, there was one priest who I remember would use what he called the "circle" trying to end up where he began, and I've found that stories always kept my attention. A favorite radio segment I'd listen to every day when it was on was Paul Harvey's the Rest of the Story. He would tell the story of a person from their life and it would draw you in and you'd find out at the end who that famous person was. But it kept my attention the whole way. As such, my own style is I read the readings, and see what other expert preachers have reflected on; I listen to Bishop Robert Barron, go to the Bishop's website and watch a homily; go to a commentary I subscribe to called "Homily Helps" and read homilies from a British Dominican website (after all they are O.P., the Order of Preachers). I then think about a direction I'd like to go for a theme, and like to find a story of a person who relates to the theme and then make my points. I write out each homily each week, but try my best to preach without notes. Admittedly this is easier at the Sunday Masses; I refer to the Saturday night Mass sometimes as the "focus group" as I've sometimes chucked a homily and re-wrote it and know what works and isn't working by Sunday. I'm not Bishop Sheen, but I try my best each week and it's my goal to give people something to think about that can help them on their faith journey. I look back too on what has worked and what hasn't worked. With children's Masses, I read a story book each week basing this on a poll of first graders I conducted where I asked if it was OK to read stories in my homilies and the consent was unanimous. (When the new school year starts I'll try to mention the book of the week in this space). One thing to consider is reading a homily yourself too. The bishop's site uscgb.org has daily videos which are quite good, and the site for Bishop Robert Baron, wordonfire.org, has wonderful weekly messages and many great articles.

Following the homily, we profess our faith on Solemnities and Sundays. We do this to respond to the Word of God and affirm our common faith together. Note a few years back it was altered slightly for translation from "We" to "I" and I really appreciate this, as the faith is an individual thing too - each one of us has to affirm that we will follow God.

Lastly, we have the Prayers of the Faithful or Universal Prayer. Here we pray for the church, the needs of the community, those burdened by difficulties in life or any needs we may have.

If I had to summarize the Liturgy of the Word in one sentence, it would be let God speak to you. As I said, even though we've heard many of these passages before, there's always something new that speaks to us as the stories are timeless.

Next week, we'll take a look at the Liturgy of the Eucharist where we celebrate Jesus giving us time and time again the gift of Himself.
Have a blessed week!

Fr. Paul