



TEACHING MASS - BULLETIN INSERT
LITURGY OF THE WORD: GOD SPEAKING TO US
SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2023



CHRIST PRESENT IN HIS WORD



At the beginning of Mass on Sunday, as the priest processes in, someone, either a Deacon or a lector, is carrying in a large book. This book, often bound in red leather or even in silver and gold is the book of the gospels. We carry this book in, and place it prominently in the center of the altar, drawing our eyes towards it as the focal point during the first half of the Mass. This first half is called the Liturgy of the Word, and it centers around the contents within that book.

We should ask ourselves: why do we treat a book with such reverence? Why is this book placed on the altar and made the center of attention of our worship? The answer is that within that book are the words of Jesus Christ.

In the beginning of the gospel of John, the apostle begins by telling us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” God’s presence is there in the words of scripture. This is made all the more real when later on in that first chapter of John’s gospel, he tells us that that Word, “was made flesh,” referring to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. And so, our faith tells us that Jesus Christ is present to us in the proclaiming of scripture, and most especially the four gospels, which are the recorded words of Jesus Christ himself: his teachings, his parables, his miracles, and ultimately the historical events of his life, passion, death, and resurrection. We enshrine the Gospels because within those words are Jesus Christ.

But it is not only the gospels in which God’s word is made known to us. Yes, the gospels have pride of place because they are the words of God spoken by the very mouth of God, Jesus Christ. However, all of scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, are inspired by the Holy Spirit. There is no word in all of scripture that is not from God himself. When the Church compiled the Bible over 1700 years ago, it did so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that the whole world had the same inspired word of God to help shape their lives. These words of holy scripture are what we proclaim at Mass. Jesus Christ speaks to us at every Mass through His Word.

A GIFT OFFERED AND RECEIVED

It is no accident that even as God speaks to us through his Word, it is through the voices of people that his Word is proclaimed. Like many other gifts, God first gives us something, and then we use what He gave us to make something for Him in return. Even the bread we offer at Mass first came from grain that God gave us. So too God gives us His word in scripture, but he desires to hear us proclaim it aloud. Those who read the word of God are in a sense making an offering of their own voice to God, while those listening are offering up their hearing to God. In this sense, both proclaiming the Word of God and listening to it are themselves acts of worship.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

HOW READINGS ARE CHOSEN

Unlike other venues, the readings used for Mass are not chosen at random. In fact, as a general rule, they are not chosen by any one person, but rather are chosen for the whole Church. By this, we mean that the readings you hear each Sunday are being read in the church in the next town, the next state, and even Catholic churches on the other side of the world.

The word “Catholic,” comes from the Greek word meaning, “universal,” and one of our greatest expressions of that universal aspect of our Church is how no matter where you go, the liturgy will still be the same. Whether here in Hawaii, Washington DC, London, Rome, or even Antarctica, the prayers, the structure, and even the readings will be the same. The only difference would be the language that they use. Our readings, and indeed all the prayers at Mass, are chosen for the entire Church, and follow a perfect and inspired formula.

THE FIRST READING

The first reading is taken either from the Old Testament or, during the Easter Season, the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. The first reading lays the foundation for the whole Liturgy of the Word, often connecting to the Gospel to be proclaimed at that Mass by means of foreshadowing either the event of that day’s Gospel or the message behind it. It is often either the telling of a historical event or a prophecy.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Taken from the book of Psalms, this acts as a kind of praise in which the people take part. It is a reading from scripture, but it is also a dialogue between psalmist and congregation which focuses on praising God. The psalms would have been something Jesus and the Apostles prayed, and so taking part in the response, either sung or recited, connects us to them and to 2000 years of worshippers praising God in the same way.



THE SECOND READING

Sometimes called the Epistle, the second reading is taken from one of the letters the New Testament written by the Apostles. This reading, addressed by the Apostles, often St. Paul, speaks to us as it did the early Church to whom those letters were first addressed. Our reading from them relates to the fact that the early Church and our Catholic Church today are the same Church, and that the message of these letters is as relevant to us today as it was to those early Christians.

THE GOSPEL

Once we have announced the Gospel with the Alleluia, the deacon, or in his absence, the priest, proclaims the Gospel, the very words and actions of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. We revere the Gospel so much that we stand during its proclamation, like a soldier at attention in the presence of their Commander-in-Chief. As these are the very words of God spoken by His own lips, we bring all our focus to these words, for they are the peak and height of the Liturgy of the Word. It is the climax of our proclamation.



THE HOMILY

If the Gospel is the peak of the Liturgy of the Word, then the homily is the descending from the mountain. The homily is the priest taking the established word of God and expressing to us how it continues to speak to us today, even with the cultural differences and lifetimes of history that have taken place.

THE PROFESSION OF FAITH

The Creed, which the lay faithful recite with the priest, is our symbolic response to having heard the Word of God. In response to the teaching of God found in scripture, we acclaim: “I believe!”

THE UNIVERSAL PRAYER OR PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

The Word of God always focusses us on our mission, and so we conclude the Liturgy of the Word by offering prayers and petitions for the Church, the world, and all the needs of our community.