



Liturgical Cycles and the Readings At Mass

The Liturgy of the Word has a number of “cycles” to it, that correspond to the ‘liturgical year;’ that is, the year beginning with the First Sunday of Advent, OR the calendar year. The liturgical year fixes the seasons of Advent, Christmastide, Ordinary Time after Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time after Easter. The calendar year fixes the dates on which the feasts and celebrations of the saints and of Mary are celebrated. All the Lectionary cycles are pinned to either one of these two ‘year-long’ cycles.

There are three Sunday Cycles determined by a rotation of three years. We are in “Year C” which emphasizes the Gospel of Luke. Year A focuses on Matthew, and year B focuses on Mark. The Gospel of John appears more frequently in the gospel readings of Eastertide, both during the week and on Sundays.

Then there are two Week Day Cycles (the Lectionary for Weekday cycle I, or Weekday II. We are in Cycle II this year. The Saint’s Days are celebrated on any day and are keyed to the calendar year. If a Saint’s Day falls on a Sunday, though, the Sunday celebration is more important and so that feast would either be suppressed for that year or moved to another date. Each Saint has suggested readings that can replace the reading of the weekday, if it is outside of Advent, Christmas, Lent, or Easter. In those seasons, Saints celebrations that are important are called Feasts and Solemnities (Like St. Joseph, or of the Apostles or the Blessed Virgin Mary), instead of just commemorations. Feasts and Solemnities almost always are celebrated on their day if it falls during the week.

Now that your heads have been totally scrambled with all these “when’s” and “if’s,”—usually this stuff is more interesting to priests, deacons and liturgists—suffice it to say that the plan for the readings can be had by ordering a subscription to a monthly guide like *Magnificat*. You can order this online from the link: <http://www.magnificat.net/english/index.asp>, or by calling 1-866-273-5215 to place an order. For a yearly missal, you can contact the parish office to place an order in September for the following year. There are other, ‘permanent’ missals that you can order too. Just drop by the office to look at the options.

The Liturgy of the Word



The Liturgy of the Word comes to us from the synagogue service, wherein the Word of God is read out and explained by the members of the minion (The requisite ten men needed to form a school), or by a rabbi, a student of the Torah. Jesus is depicted in the Gospels from time to time going into the synagogue, being handed a scroll and asked to offer a commentary for the listeners. The most important of these was when he read that famous passage: "The

Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." In His reflection he laid claim to being a sort of messiah, or anointed one of God. Some thought this to be a dangerous thing for him to say, because his interpretation of the prophet's words put everyone on notice to watch for him to make a mistake in prophecy or its fulfillment. If he erred, he would be accused of blasphemy.

St. Paul in his missionary journeys made it his habit to go first to the Jews in the synagogues throughout the cities where he would preach. Proclaiming Jesus as Messiah and Lord, risen from the dead, ascended into Glory and having sent the Holy Spirit as the source of all the miraculous deeds and powerful words that he spoke, many times put him in danger of being killed for the same blasphemy.

Thankfully, these days we don't have crowds ready to stone their priests for what they teach in our churches—largely because we are all believers in Jesus as Son of God.

The format for the Liturgy of the Word developed over time from the synagogue where a passage of the Torah was read, and/or a passage from the Prophets was read and followed by a "lively discussion" among the more learned members of the minion, or a rabbi with others in attendance listening. In the Early Church, was added the reading from a letter of one of the Apostles. The stories of Jesus' ministry were also told from memory or after the Gospels were written they began to be read as well. The Synagogue service always had included recitations of psalms and canticles from the scriptures and so this was brought forward as well.

By the mid second century, the Liturgy of the Word in the Roman West was fairly well set with an Epistle, a psalm, an Alleluia (or Tract during Lent) and a Gospel followed by a homily on Sundays and Feasts of the Martyrs and Confessors. This pattern was amended in the middle ages with the insertion of another piece of poetry called a Sequence, the last vestiges of which we hear on Easter, Pentecost, Corpus Christi and Our Lady of Sorrows.

With the reform of the Mass after Vatican II, a third reading taken from the Old Testament was added and all but the four sequences listed above were suppressed.



The Liturgy of the Word Part II

The Cycles of readings have a planned approach to reading up to 85% of the scriptures over a three year period of following both weekend and daily Masses. Actually, we read far more scripture in our public worship than the average protestant will hear in their life time at their services, with the exception of those Anglican Churches that have daily Eucharistic liturgies.

The Church seeks to expose us to the vast treasury of texts from the bible, arranged in accord with the liturgical season of the year, and the needs of people at different times. Harkening back to our Jewish roots and the two basic cultures of nomadic and fixed modes of living in villages and towns, there developed a way of reading the Hebrew Scriptures that was at times urban and other times agrarian.

Many feasts of the Hebrew calendar, and thus carried forward into Christian liturgy are based in either of these two cultural realities. The agrarian feasts included such as the feast of Booths (Harvest), of First Fruits (Hope for a good crop). The urban feasts included political or social events such as the martyrdom of the Maccabees, the expulsion-Exodus from Egypt, and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, etc. In these we can see the development of our own calendar with the wedding of agrarian or urban celebrations seen through the lens of the life of Jesus and of His church. Apropos to the themes of these feasts are readings that either commemorate or tell the story of the event celebrated, or explain the meaning of the celebration for our lives, such as a virtue of a particular saint, or a theological and scriptural basis for a doctrine.

But limiting the selection of readings to these concerns would necessarily limit the amount of Sacred Scripture we are exposed to, and that is not in accord with the goal of the reform of the liturgy in the documents of Vatican II. So the church also added what are called "semi-through readings" of the books of the bible. There is a plan laid out in one of the appendices to the Lectionary that governs such "through readings." These usually happen in Ordinary Time. The "through readings do cause some homily problems because often they do not harmonize with the Gospel of the day.

Liturgy of the Word Part III



The General Instruction of the Roman Missal speaks of the various presences of the Lord in the celebration of Mass. One of those is that when the Word of God is proclaimed, it is the Lord speaking to us through the person of the Lector, the Deacon or the Priest. It is in this context that I present the following reflection.

The Scriptures tell us that the word of God is “living and active...able to cut” deeply through “to the heart.” Therefore when we listen to the word of God proclaimed at Mass, we should allow ourselves to be vulnerable—literally woundable—by the words we hear. Vulnerability requires that we set aside our ego, our pretense, our masks so that we may be cut open by the word and see for ourselves what must be changed. The word of God came into the world “with a sword” to divide us, if necessary even from our families because of our radical adherence to the Word of God, who came to save us.

In John’s Gospel we have heard that those who love God will keep his commandments. How else can we know His commandments if we don’t 1) read them and 2) open our hearts to the meaning of the Word of God we hear read out to us at Mass or in our private prayer time? Furthermore, the Lord promised that the Holy Spirit would “lead us into all truth,” “bear witness to Him” and “remind us of all he commanded (taught) us to do”.

In other words, the Liturgy of the Word must be listened to, not merely heard. Listening means that we internalize the Word of God and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us in bringing more and more of our lives into conformity with the Word we have heard and welcomed into our hearts. Sometimes that word hurts because it addresses directly some sin, or sinful attachment we have in our lives. If we are to take seriously that Spirit-led statement that “Jesus is Lord” then we will be compelled by that truth to remove from our lives all that we find to be sinful, and to cease doing those things which lead us into sin.

This is the radical transformation that Jesus had in mind when he said that a disciple should not “put his hand to the plow and then turn back”. Those of us who farm know the ‘violence’ done to the surface of the earth when we plow it up. We literally overturn the surface to reveal what is under the surface in order to allow a deeper penetration of the water, the fertilizer and the seed that we want to plant for a good crop. Let us begin anew to allow the Liturgy of the Word to plow up our lives, to overturn our complacency and to root out the sin that we have kept under the surface, to the Glory of God!

The Liturgy of the Word IV



Since the second Vatican Council, the Lectionary has been expanded twice. The first made the monumental change of adding the Old Testament to the full year's cycles of readings. Originally the first reading was taken from the Epistles and the Gospel was the same from year to year for a given Sunday (such as the First Sunday after Pentecost).

The First Reading now gives us a large sampling of the Old Testament (or Jewish or Hebrew Scriptures). This fuller sampling gives us a better mooring in our tradition, because as Pope Benedict points out, Christianity must see itself as united with the faith of Abraham, but also emphasize the reality of Jesus Christ in which the faith of Abraham finds its fulfillment. In other words, what we don't know can hurt our self understanding as Catholics in the continuum of the Covenant of Abraham in Jesus. We need to know the history of Humankind's relationship with God from its very beginnings to the present day. For God's own reasons, He chose Abraham as our Father in Faith, made Jesus a descendant of Abraham and of David, and son of Mary. It is within the Hebrew context that the covenant we live in was first formed, that of blood atonement for sins, and codified in the legal texts of Judaism. It was through Judaism that Jesus brought his message, which though thoroughly Jewish, has new additions in His rabbinical interpretation of the ancient texts of His People. It was for supposedly violating those prescriptions of Torah and established rabbinical norms that the charges which led to Jesus' crucifixion were developed. It is from the wealth of prophetic writings about the Messiah, about God's invitations and threats of punishments, the punishments themselves, and finally God's welcoming back of the Jewish People that become the template for God's great act of redemption in the Passion of Jesus.

God speaks to us through these scriptures. He teaches us about our own anthropology, how we act and as human beings how we have rather lamentably, but consistently acted over the millennia of human history. He speaks to our hearts as his unfaithful bride, constantly calling us to repentance, to reform, to communion with Him through His Son. Let us continue to listen to these readings with an open heart to learning how God loves us, and wants us to be with Him in eternity.

The Liturgy of the Word V



The Responsorial Psalm is an ancient way reciting the Psalms. Jews, when making pilgrimages or processions used some psalms as verse-refrain ways of keeping all in the procession focused on the purpose of the celebration. One example, is the Psalm that has a refrain His mercy endures forever, which was interspersed with the verses of the songs of ascents, psalms sung as the people began the ascent to the Temple Mount to bring to a climax their pilgrimage.

The Psalm recounts the most important story of the salvation of the Chosen People from slavery in Egypt, echoed in the Babylonian captivity when the Temple was reconstructed in the time of Nehemiah. At the height of their visit to the Holy City, they would make sacrifices to atone for their sins.

The Responsorial Psalm was adopted by some of the desert monastic communities to keep the monks periodically praying the psalms during their work, and also to ritualize a prayer technique called *Lectio Divina*. In this latter prayer technique, the monk would 'chew on the text of a Psalm to find a prayer word or phrase that would encompass his meditation. Often this would result in a phrase that was repeated through the day, like a refrain. When these phrases were used for communal prayer, they were said *antiphonally* (literally: sounded against) alternating with a two to six line division of the psalm text.

This is the form in which we find the Responsorial Psalm today. An antiphon is said and repeated by the assembly, followed by a portion of the psalm, at which the antiphon is repeated. In the Liturgy of both temple worship and then the Church, these Psalms were sung in a kind of song-speech called chanting. It is from this style that we get the name Chant for musical settings of the Mass. The Responsorial Psalm is usually conceived as YOUR RESPONSE to the First Reading. So try to let it resonate with the first reading as you hear it.

An Approach To Praying the Responsorial Psalm

Come to Mass a little bit early if you can. When you get to your pew, read and memorize the sentence of the antiphon. It is usually in the missalette or in your own hand missal. Repeat it over and over again for about five minutes in a spirit of prayer before God, with an open heart to what God might say to you through that phrase. Then as the Psalm is read or sung, let the text again go into your heart and come out of your mouth, listening to each of the psalm portions and letting the antiphon be a focus or comment on the rest of the text. Always try to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, and let the psalm be your response to the readings.

Liturgy of the Word VI



The second reading is taken from the letters of the Apostles to the churches or individuals. What is important is that they have a traditional apostolic origin. Modern scholars have been able to determine with relative certainty that some attributions of authorship are made, not by the apostles themselves, but by students who were masters of their teacher's (Apostle's) ideas and important themes. They received succession of authority over their

community from the Apostle himself.

The Church has read from the Epistles from the mid-to-late first century AD (CE) at Eucharistic celebrations if there was no Apostle present. The Extraordinary Form of the Roman Missal preserves the tradition that persisted up to the reforms of Vatican II, that there be a reading first from the Epistles and then from the Gospels. Vatican II reforms, directed by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), began the practice of three readings for each Sunday and two for each weekday. The first reading outside Easter Tide (and Advent) for both weekdays and Sundays is from the Old Testament. The second reading is taken from the Epistles, as before, and to an extent maintains the order that existed previously, particularly for the privileged seasons. During Ordinary Time, there are "through readings" of the Epistles, at both daily Mass and Sunday Masses, that expose the teaching for daily living and Church order, as well as application of Gospel principles.

Because many of the epistles were written by St. Paul, they are the oldest Christian writings in existence. They have, for example, the oldest compilation of the full Good News rationale (Romans 1-8), the oldest accounts of the Circumcision controversy (Galatians), the oldest institution narrative (1 Corinthians) and the oldest set of requirements for a Bishop and a Deacon (1st Timothy). These letters, along with the Gospels, contain much of what we need to live our lives and are worthy of prayerful and academic study to learn how to understand ourselves, and to be a Christian in the modern world.

Liturgy of the Word VII



The Acclamation for the gospel follows the reading of the Epistle for the day, and has a changeable text for Lent, otherwise it is the word "Alleluia."

"Alleluia" is a transliteration of ecstatic jubilation that relates the actual sound that some who, overtaken by the Holy Spirit, had uttered. As a printed text "Alleluia" goes way back into the end of the Babylonian captivity, though it surely is hundreds, if not

thousands of years older than that. It has a relation to the ululations of Semitic peoples and Africans, when they both rejoice and mourn. It is a wordless sound of high emotion/spiritual elation. Some have translated it into meaning "Praise God!", but it can mean so much more than that.

In the Christian era, the alleluia takes on the significance of the cry of jubilation at the resurrection of Jesus, and the entry into eternal life of the Baptized when the Holy Spirit fills them for the first time. It may also be related to the *glossalalia* or tongues speaking of the early Church.

The tradition of changing the Alleluia in Lent is a very old one in the Roman Rite, dating to the second century. The suppression of the Alleluia is said to be a penitential act of the church because the weight of our own wretchedness comes upon us so profoundly as we draw near to the commemoration of Jesus' Passover passion. We grieve at the thought that it was our own sins that put Him on the cross. We are so grieved that we do not feel like praising God. The approved texts in the new four-volume edition of the Lectionary (2002) has a variety of texts for lent, some of which we may have never heard: We will recognize these three: "Glory and praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ!", "Glory to you, Word of God, Lord Jesus Christ!" and "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, King of endless glory!" But you may want to know that there are five more texts for Lent.

This chant is sung as the book of the Gospels is processed from the altar to the ambo for the reading of the Gospel. Since the Gospel is the high point of the liturgy of the Word, it is accompanied by ceremonial and singing in order to relate its importance: The Lord Himself speaking from the accounts of His life to us about what matters most to Him. It is the presence of the Lord Himself, the Eternal Word that makes us cry Alleluia!

Liturgy of the Word VIII



As we saw last week, the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word because it is the Lord Himself speaking to us, out of the Apostolic remembrances of His life's events to teach us those things that are (were) most important to the Lord. These stories and teachings relate to us what happened to and through Jesus and His Apostles during the years of his ministry in Israel. It was important to the Apostles and their successor-bishops that these memories be

written down for the ages to come until the return of the Lord at the end of time.

The Gospels contain what was remembered of the sayings of Jesus, the actions of Jesus, the miracles of Jesus, the persecution and murder of Jesus by the State, and the early accounts of His resurrection and ascension into Heaven.

When we hear the Gospel, or any part of the Word of God read out at Mass or in other liturgies, it is the faith of the Church that Jesus is speaking to us. It is also the faith of the Church that the word is living and active, and can cut to the heart, beckoning us to repent of sin, change our attitudes, adjust our thinking and begin to obey those commands that the Lord in the Gospels demands of us. Hence it is more than just telling stories. Rather, it is a listening to the clarion call of the Lord to action, within and without to bring about the Kingdom, His reign on Earth.

The Gospel should always be challenging. It should always cause us to pause, to reconsider, to think more deeply about whether our lives conform to this world or to the Kingdom of God.

Does the story of the Rich Young Man not challenge us to do more than just go to church, to honor father and mother, not steal, not lie, not kill? Does it not call us to love as God loves? Does it not put into relief the generosity of God toward the feckless sinner over and against our idea of deserving to be blessed because of our adherence to those same commands?

Let the Gospels challenge you. When you hear them, ask yourself, what is God challenging me to work on this week? What are my sin-attachments? What is getting in the way of the abundant life God is calling me to live and lead?