

## PART 2 ---- THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

This Rite consists of: 1<sup>st</sup> Reading, Responsorial Psalm, 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading (on Sundays & major feasts), Gospel acclamation, Gospel, homily, profession of faith (creed) and the general intercessions.

**INTRODUCTION:** **Historically**, there was a gradual **formalizing** of the reading of the Scriptures with the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice in the early years. There is evidence to suggest that from the beginning, some of the apostolic letters were read when Christians gathered together (Colossians 4:16, Philemon 2, Revelation 1:3). There is also evidence (Acts 20:7-8) that **instruction** and **explanation** also took place at the Eucharist. So, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, in a more formal relationship to each other as we know them, became more obvious by about the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. Remember that the Church was persecuted for much of its first few centuries, and at times and in places after that, and this influenced where and when the Mass could be celebrated.

Many will remember that in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council, there were just two readings on Sundays – read in **Latin** - and then read in English translation in latter years. In an attempt to introduce us to more of the **richness of the Scriptures**, the Council Fathers decided that there should be three readings on Sundays and on special feasts.

**SUNDAYS:** For Sundays, they designed a **three year** cycle, with the characteristic feature being the Gospel. Year A is based predominantly on Matthew, Year B on Mark and Year C on Luke. St John's Gospel occurs on the first Sundays of Lent, during the Easter season and on certain Sundays in year B, and on some special feasts. (*As a point of interest, if you want to determine which year we are in, this is the procedure: Year C years are divisible by three after you have added the numbers of the year together. E.G. 2004. Adding these four numbers, you get 6, which is divisible by 3. Year A years are the ones that follow such years, while Year B years are the ones that precede such years.*)

**WEEKDAYS:** The weekday readings are in a **two year** cycle. On weekdays, the Gospels follow a continuing story and the 1<sup>st</sup> reading varies. (*As a point of interest, if you want to determine which year we are in for weekdays, it's easy. Odd years are Year 1 (e.g. 2005) and even years are Year 2 (e.g. 2006.)*)

The Liturgy of the Word is not just a preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist. **A profound relationship exists between the two**, since the **Word of God** and the **Body of the Lord** are **two aspects of the same mystery**. Just as **Christ** is present in the **Eucharist**, so Christ is present in the reading of the **Word**. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council proclaimed both to be

**equal.** The Council Fathers explained that it is the Word that **leads us to,** and **gives meaning to,** the Eucharist itself.

**FIRST READING: Historically,** the Jewish synagogue service had, as a key component, a reading of the Law and the Prophets. This Jewish tradition, as well as the belief that all the Scriptures are God's inspired Word, resulted in the inclusion of a reading from the **Old Testament** in the Christian Liturgy of the Word. As a rule, the Old Testament texts were chosen to prepare people for the Gospel. The purpose of the reading is to lead people to Jesus Christ. Sometimes people ask why we 'still have' the Old Testament reading. The simple answer is that without the Old, we would not understand the New. The Old Testament gives us the 'family story' of God's contact with his people, a story that developed into its fullness when God sent his Son to become one of us and to redeem us.

Usually at Sunday Mass, the *Old Testament reading is linked closely to the Gospel*, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading adds another element to the theme of the day.

**RESPONSORIAL PSALM:** Again, this practice originates from the Jewish synagogue service. Christians traditionally respond to the Scripture reading by singing a psalm. In the synagogue service, the psalm verses were sung by a soloist, and the people responded with a short refrain which was frequently taken from the psalm itself. You will recognize in this description, the very same thing that we do at Mass. At Holy Family Church, we have the full sung psalm every Sunday, including the soloist singing the verses. Sometimes we also do this at St Francis Xavier's.

The psalm, then, is the congregation's response to the Scripture just proclaimed. We use God's Word to respond to God's Word. The psalm invites us to reflect on God's saving deeds for humanity.

**SECOND READING:** For centuries a reading from the New Testament has preceded the Gospel. Through this reading we **encounter the early Church living out its Christian faith.** This **witness** of the apostolic community provides us with an example for all time since Christians of every age are to recall the love of God, the good news of redemption and the duty of Christian love. The lives and witness of the early Christians is one of our most precious links with Christ himself. Through this **Apostolic** link with Christ, the **Catholic Church, founded by Christ,** maintains an unbroken line of **Succession** with Him.

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION:** '*Alleluia*' in Hebrew means - "Praise God", and in the Old Testament this joyful cry appears at the beginning or end of certain psalms used in the temple liturgy. The only occurrence of Alleluia in the New Testament occurs in Revelation 19:1-9. The timing of the Alleluia's introduction into the liturgy is confusing because St Augustine

claims that it was sung every Sunday and another source claims that it was only sung during Easter. This difference can probably be explained by differences at the local level. The Gospel Acclamation, then, normally expresses paschal joy and accompanies the Gospel procession. All the people praise God! It has special significance during the seven weeks of **Easter**, and receives special emphasis during those weeks. Of course, during **Lent** it is replaced by a more subdued Verse before the Gospel because of the theme of the season.

**GOSPEL:** From the very earliest times, a Gospel passage has been read. It is regarded as the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. That is why we stand during the reading of the Gospel, as standing gives special honour. Traditionally, a **deacon** was charged with the reading of the Gospel. Only in the absence of a deacon did a **priest** proclaim the Gospel. This is still the case today. So if a deacon is present, it is his special duty to proclaim the Gospel in word or song.

Special signs of respect and solemnity surround the reading of the Gospel. Firstly, the book is often brought in procession, - especially in larger churches. The candles that accompany the Book of the Gospels are a sign of respect. *As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century the congregation began to stand for the Gospel* as a sign a respect and alertness to the presence of the Lord. In the Middle Ages there developed other honorific signs. The making of a small sign of the cross on the book, the forehead, the mouth and the heart was seen as expressing readiness to open one's mind to the Word, to confess it with the mouth and to safeguard it in the heart. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the book began to be kissed by the priest or deacon after the proclamation, again as a sign of giving honour.

The Gospel, then, is Christ living and present among the people and a sign that Christ continues to speak to us, calling us to faith and conversion.

**HOMILY:** Again, the homily came to us from the Jewish synagogue service. In the synagogue service, after the readings from the Law and the Prophets, an **explanation** was given by the bishop/priest who was leading the celebration. About the year 150, Justin the Martyr says that following the readings, the Bishops **instructed** and **exhorted** the people to **imitate** the things that they had heard in the Scriptures. So like the Eucharist, where the bread is broken, the Scriptures, through the homily, are broken open for those present so that the message of the Scriptures can be applied to the concrete life situations of the people.

**SERMON OR HOMILY?:** Prior to Vatican II, we spoke of the 'sermon' rather than the 'homily'. A sermon could be on any spiritual topic, and in some dioceses, bishops sent out a list of sermon topics for various Sundays of the year. The Council Fathers changed the practice one of preaching a

'homily', as a homily is based on the Scripture readings of the day. It involves the 'unpacking' of the message(s) of the readings by the bishop, priest or deacon who is preaching, and the application of the message to our daily lives.

**PROFESSION OF FAITH:** In early Christianity the profession of faith was primarily associated with **baptism**. The candidate went down into the water and was required to confess personal belief by responding to a series of questions dealing with the three persons of the Trinity. The **Creed professed at Mass** is, however, a summary of the faith as expressed by the Councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381) and Chacedon (451). It is known as the Nicene Creed. In the East it became a part of the Mass in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, but the Creed did not appear in the Mass in Rome and **the West** until **1014** when Pope Benedict VII included it in the Mass on all Sundays and feasts.

The Creed is a profession of faith whereby all the people respond, assent and adhere to the Word of the God proclaimed in the Scriptures and preached in the homily. It is a response not only of doctrinal propositions, but also to the person of Christ present in the Word.

**GENERAL INTERCESSIONS:** One of the components of the Jewish synagogue service was a series of 18 blessings containing requests for individual and universal needs. At a very early period, a similar prayer became a fixed part of the Liturgy of the Word. Justin the Martyr, writing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, describes the celebration of baptism and then adds that all "offer prayers in common for ourselves, for him who had just been baptized and for people everywhere".

These prayers are sometimes called the "general intercessions" rather than the **prayers of the faithful**, since they **extend beyond the needs and concerns of the local community**.

They must have the following structure:-

1. Celebrant addresses the assembly as he opens the prayer.
2. Announcement of the intentions with the people responding. These intentions come from
  - a) The needs of the Church.
  - b) Public authorities and the salvation of the world.
  - c) Those oppressed by any need and
  - d) The local community.
3. After a period of silence, the celebrant summarises the intentions and asks God to look favourably on them. This closing prayer by the celebrant is addressed to God the Father. The people respond with Amen to show their assent to the prayers that have been offered.

**Next week - The Liturgy of the Eucharist.**