

## **Liturgy of the Word:**

Last month we broke open the Gathering Rites of the Mass to emphasize the importance of preparing our hearts, minds and bodies for the sacred Liturgy. After welcoming our God with joy and purifying our hearts through contrition, we are ready for the **Liturgy of the Word**.

We are ready to listen to Jesus, like the apostles at the Transfiguration, we listen to God's Beloved Son. The Master...our Lord Jesus Christ is going to talk to us and speaks directly to us by means of the sacred readings of the Mass. By faith we know that when the Scriptures are read, God himself is speaking to his people; and Christ, present in his own word proclaims the gospel.

All the readings, both the Old Testament and the New Testaments focus us on Christ. We will get to know Christ better by listening to the reading of the Holy Scriptures with prayerful attention.

By carefully listening to the Word of God as it is proclaimed and reflecting on it, we will come to know who and how Christ was, what he said and did, what he expects of us and how we are to go about becoming the people he has called us to be. Gradually we will discover the deeper meaning of our own existence. And therefore, we will get to know how to do—always and in everything—the will of God.

On Sundays and Holy Days, we usually find three readings:

**The First Reading** is from the Old Testament and records for us our shared history of God's involvement in human life; this reading is usually chosen because it relates in some way to the Gospel message.

During the Easter Season, the First Reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. This continues until the end of the Easter Season on Pentecost Sunday. The proclamation of the Acts allows us to focus on what life for Jesus' disciples was like in the early Church. We see how the disciples were transformed by the risen Christ. When they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they began to do the very works that previously had been done only by Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles make it clear that all Jesus did, He has now empowered us, His Church, to do.

Whether the first reading is from the Old Testament or the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, it requires a response from us. The reader alerts us to the end of the proclamation by telling us that what we have been listening to is **The Word of the Lord**...to which we respond "thanks be to God". We are grateful for hearing God's Word proclaimed to us.

## **Responsorial Psalm:**

After the First Reading, we pray the Responsorial Psalm...so-called because it is a prayer with several verses to which the community **responds** with a sung or spoken refrain. The Psalms were the prayer of Jesus, an integral part of his Jewish tradition, prayed daily. When we pray them, or sing our refrain, we are reminded that we belong to Jesus. The Psalm is a response to the first reading and relates to some aspect of it. Mindful that the Psalm is chosen especially to draw out the meaning of the First Reading and is also the prayer of Jesus and His Body, the Church, we have a lot to reflect upon as we listen to the Psalm chanted, and reply with the response of the day. In doing this, the prayer of Jesus becomes our

own. The refrain can be memorized and taken with us to be prayed throughout the week as we go about our daily lives.

**The Second Reading**, unlike the first, is always from the New Testament. Remember that “testament” means “covenant” or God’s promise of salvation. We consider these readings to be the Word of God and so we listen with expectation. What will God say to us? The second reading is usually from the same Letter or from the Book of Revelation for several Sundays in a row. Usually it is not connected to the Gospel or the first reading, but rather is a continuation of the previous Sunday’s reading. It is a good practice to pick up the Bible and read and study at home the Letter or Book of Revelation that is currently being read.

The Second reading is always taken from letters originally written to different local churches in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. As such, these letters were addressed to particular people and addressed the issues they faced in their time and place. Sometimes we may be surprised to find our own concerns addressed by what we read or hear.

The reader again alerts us to the end of the proclamation by telling us that what we have been listening to is “the Word of the Lord.” Our response, again taken from the Bible itself, is to say with gratitude: “Thanks be to God!”

So, the second reading, taken from the writings of an apostle let us hear about the early Church, their struggles, their faith, their loyalty, and how in many ways their challenges were very much like our own.

#### **Gospel Acclamation:**

After the second reading, we come to a high point in the Liturgy of the Word, because we are about to hear the Gospel (the words and deeds of Christ himself proclaimed. This happens with great solemnity:

**The cantor intones** “Alleluia!” an acclamation associated with the joy of Easter. In the season of Lent it is replaced by “Glory to you, O Word of God Lord Jesus Christ.”

**The whole congregation stands... the priest says a prayer** asking God to be in his heart and on his lips that he may worthily proclaim the Gospel. If a deacon is reading, he will receive a blessing from the priest who will say a similar prayer for the deacon.

The **gospel is read by an ordained minister**, the deacon or, when no deacon is present, the priest...the book of **Gospels is carried aloft in procession** to the ambo **accompanied by candle bearers**, it may be incensed before reading and **is kissed at the conclusion** of the reading. The priest or deacon greets the congregation by once again asking that the Lord be with them. The people respond by asking that the same be the case with the minister proclaiming the gospel. The minister announces which Gospel the selection is from and the people respond: “Glory to you, O Lord.” The minister then makes the sign of the cross over the Gospel reading and then on his forehead, lips and heart. All of those in attendance also trace the sign of the cross on their foreheads, lips and hearts...this is to remind us that the words of Jesus in the Gospel change us...we pray that the words we hear will shape our thoughts, our words and our actions and form us into Christ.

Ever since the Gospel was first read in Christian churches, the people have never listened to it in any way other than standing. These are the signs of special veneration: on the part of the priest or deacon, the blessing and the preparatory prayer, as well as the kiss with which he concludes the reading; on the part of the assembly, their standing up and the acclamations with which they acknowledge the presence of Christ, speaking through these readings.

When the priest or deacon kisses book after proclaiming the Gospel, he says: *“May the words of the Gospel wipe away our sins.”* We want to make this prayer our own, and with it to show the Lord that we are ready to give our lives for the truths contained in what we have just heard.

### **The Homily:**

Homily means: “explanation” in Greek. Its purpose is to develop, explain and teach the way of transforming into life what has been proclaimed. It takes into account the mystery being celebrated and the needs of the listeners. It brings the scriptures into the present moment. A great homily will make our “hearts burn within us” for living lives more in conformity to Christ; and the great need we have to be in communion with him.

Listening to a homily is very much like listening to scripture. It requires our whole attention. If we really believe that God speaks to us, we will hang on every word the homilist speaks expecting to receive the unique message God intends for us. If we **expect** to hear a “word” from God, we will...no matter what the quality of the homily. And if we do, we have heard a **great** homily because it has come from God.

### **The Creed:**

All that Christ has come to teach us, we believe with all the strength of our soul. Such is the summary of the Creed. (a word that comes from the first word of the Creed in Latin “Credo” which means “**I Believe.**” The creed expresses our response and assent to what we have just heard in the readings and in the homily. When we pray the Creed, we say that we are willing to put our lives on the line for our belief in God and in all that the Church teaches. The message of the Creed should be the unshakeable foundation of every Christian’s way of thinking and acting and living.

### **The Prayer of the Faithful:**

The Prayers of the Faithful bring to mind the last part of the creed. We believe in one holy catholic church. This means that our membership in the Body of Christ extends across the world and transcends time and space because it also includes those who have gone before us. As Catholics, we should never forget that it is our duty to intercede endlessly on behalf of all people. We continue then to respond to the word of God in the Prayer of the Faithful by praying for the needs of the Church, for public authorities and the salvation of the world; for those burdened by any kind of difficulty, and for the local community. The Liturgy of the Word concludes with these intercessions.