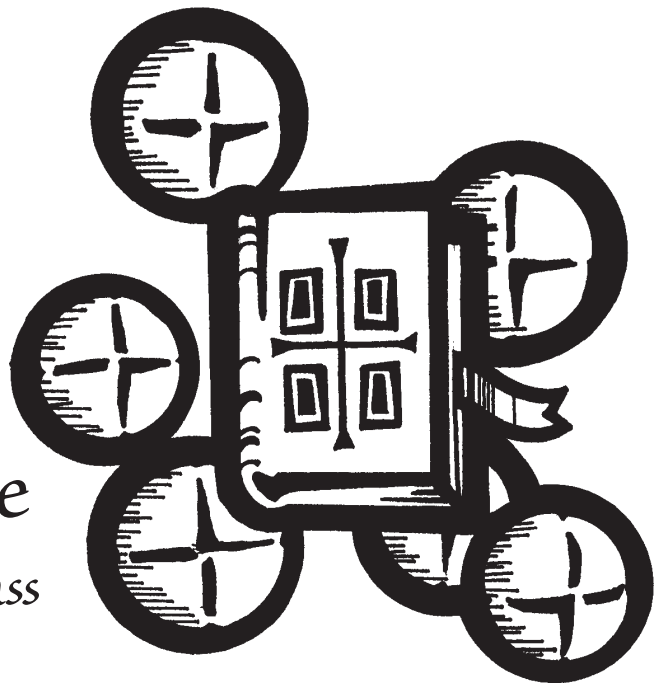


Give Thanks and Praise

A Popular Explanation of the Mass



Part 4

The Liturgy of the Word (b)

Lovers need to talk. Lovers need to listen. And even more, lovers *want* to talk and listen. And yet they do so in different ways which correspond to different times in their lives. They do not continuously share the same things with one another over and over again. The new and the unexpected in their lives is shared against the background of what is old and familiar.

So it is with the loving God who shares his message with us. We hear God's word through a prism of a changing yet constantly recurring cycle of feasts and seasons known as the liturgical year.

The Lectionary: The readers in your parish find the readings assigned for each day of the year in a liturgical book called the lectionary. The volume also includes various texts associated with the readings such as the psalms, and acclamations. One of the aims of the Second Vatican Council was that "the treasures of the Bible...be opened up more lavishly, so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of the Lord" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 51). Those who fashioned the system of readings found in the lectionary attempted to follow the desire of the Council by incorporating more selections from the Old Testament and by providing a more representative number of scriptural readings than were formerly proclaimed at Mass.

The book is divided into various settings, the first containing the readings for Sundays. What is characteristic about this section is that it apportions the Sunday readings according to a three year cycle, the main feature of each being the gospel: year A is based on Matthew, year B on Mark, and year C on Luke. St. John's gospel occurs on Sundays of Lent, during the Easter season, and on certain Sundays during the year B. Within these three cycles the readings are distributed to focus on the various seasons of the liturgical year.

The Liturgical Year: Many people seem to understand our Christian cycle of feasts and seasons as merely a type of dramatization of events in the life of Christ, something like a liturgical pageant. And yet Pope Paul VI reminded us that the liturgical year exerts "a special sacramental power and influence which strengthens Christian life."

Writers often use the term "paschal mystery" when commenting on these lines of the Pope. This term refers to the whole saving work of Christ which attained its highest expression in his passing over from death to new life. We, however, participate in this passover of Christ since our own experiences are intimately joined to his. Thus the liturgical year commemorates the numerous ways in which the Christ is born among us today, the many ways in which he heals and save us, the various ways in which we with Christ overcome death and are restored to a new life. Put another way, the liturgical year is our way of staying in touch with Jesus the Lord. We don't have to worry about him staying in contact with us. But we need to wrap ourselves in the mystery of God's loving action as we progress onward to the completion of the Kingdom begun on earth by Christ.

Let's briefly look at each of the major seasons of the liturgical year and the readings assigned to them.

Advent: During this four week season of quiet and restrained joy we look forward to Christ's second coming at the end of time and prepare ourselves to celebrate the feast of Christ's first coming. Our sure conviction is that just as God once came in the person of Jesus, so Jesus will come again. The Old Testament readings for Advent are, quite naturally, prophecies about the Messiah. The second readings are exhortations; while the gospels focus on the Last Coming, John the Baptist, and the events immediately preceding Christ's birth.

Christmas Season: Extending from the first Mass on Christmas to the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, this season embraces a series of feasts which generally focus on what it means for the Word to have become flesh and dwell among us. The readings, chosen in light of the mystery of each feast, tell us that human life and all of creation is holy, is blessed, is graced, and is worthy of God. They tell of the Lord who revealed himself as the Messiah sent by the Father not only to the Jewish nation but to all peoples.

Lent: Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and continues till the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening. Thus this season is not a preparation for Easter alone, but rather for the "Paschal Triduum" which begins on Holy Thursday night and continues till Easter Sunday evening.

Three practices are traditionally associated with Lent: prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. According to the ancient writers of the Church, Christians fast, not only in imitation of Christ who fasted forty days in the desert, but also to have something to share with the poor (almsgiving). Lent has often been called a retreat before baptism, a time when Catholics by prayer and good works join the catechumens who are preparing to be baptized during the Easter Vigil, a time when Catholics prepare to renew their own baptismal promises at Easter.

During this time the Old Testament readings focus on the main events of the history of salvation. The gospels begin by recalling Christ's temptations and continue with the presentation of certain baptismal themes (e.g., the man born blind) or with other themes appropriate for this season. The readings from the letters of the apostles often correspond with the other readings and provide a connection between them.

Paschal Triduum: These three days ("triduum" is Latin for "three days") are the high holy days of the Church. The Triduum begins with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening and reaches its climax during the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night when the catechumens are baptized, confirmed, and receive the eucharist (the sacraments of initiation). During these days we celebrate the passion-death-and-rising of Jesus Christ. It is a time when we enter the timelessness of God, not merely looking back at a past event, but participating in a present reality. What happened to Jesus continues to happen to us.

The scriptures proclaimed during this great feast highlight various aspects of the paschal mystery, and yet

the liturgy never loses sight of the whole mystery. For example, the Lord celebrated in the eucharist on Holy Thursday is the Risen Lord; the sufferings and death recalled on Good Friday only have meaning in light of the Resurrection.

Easter Season: Easter is so overwhelming a mystery that it needs time to run its course. The Easter Season, called "the great Sunday" by St. Athanasius, is a period of seven weeks and ends on Pentecost. It is a season when the joy and happiness of Easter are extended. It is also a time when those who were sacramentally initiated at the Vigil are encouraged to reflect on the meaning of the sacraments that were celebrated. The first readings, from the Acts of the Apostles, show how the primitive Church responded to the love of the Risen Lord. The gospels recount the appearances of the Risen Christ, recall that he is the Good Shepherd, and present us with excerpts from the Lord's discourse at the Last Supper.

Ordinary Time: By Ordinary Time we mean that period of the year having no special seasons. Actually, it is not very ordinary at all, since it is the whole mystery of Christ, without any particular emphases, which is now celebrated. During these week the gospels present the Christ who spoke in parables, who instructed the people, and worked miracles. The Old Testament readings, highlighting the unity of the two Testaments, are generally chosen to correspond to the gospel selections. The readings from the apostles provide us with instruction, exhortation, and encouragement on what it means to live a Christian life. Toward the end of Ordinary Time our attention is once again turned to the Second Coming of Christ.

To be a Christian is to be a person whose life is nourished by the scriptures. We are to be a community of faith and, as St. Paul reminds us, "faith comes through hearing, and what is heard is the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). As we gather together and celebrate our yearly cycle of feasts and seasons, we do so that we may continually be touched and transformed anew by the announcement of God's love and power in our lives.

Next time we will conclude our reflection on the Liturgy of the Word by considering several factors which help us more fully to experience the word of God proclaimed in our liturgical celebrations.