

PROCLAIMING AND RECEIVING THE WORD OF GOD

In tonight's mystagogia, we examine that section of the Eucharist in which God's Word, as found in scripture, is proclaimed and received.

PREFACE: THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

A lectionary assigns the portions of scriptures which are to be read on specific days. The lectionary we use for Sundays and festivals is the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). It was published in 1992 by the North American ecumenical body called the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), a forum for consultation on worship renewal among many Christian churches in the United States and Canada, and supported internationally by the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC). This lectionary has been adopted by church after church throughout the world—from North America to South Africa, from Great Britain to Australia and New Zealand, from South America to Japan, from large churches to small. It has had to win its way simply by its own excellence and by the appeal of the idea of reading the scriptures on Sundays and feast days in concert with other Christians elsewhere in the world as a sign of our unity in Jesus Christ. There has been no international body to compel its use. The use of this sign of unity, this common reading, has been taken up freely by churches throughout the world.

The Revised Common Lectionary presents us with the brilliant idea of the gospels always being so read in any one year that we hear one of the synoptic gospels (either Matthew, Mark or Luke) juxtaposed to John. The Revised Common Lectionary strengthens our reading of the New Testament letters, of the Acts of the Apostles and of the Revelation to John. It especially reintroduced to many of our churches the robust reading of the Hebrew scriptures. And among many of us it has brought about a new singing of the psalms in response to the first reading. It has indeed enabled the setting out of what the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II called "richer fare" served on "the table of God's word" in Christian assemblies, or what Martin Luther called that "preaching and driving Christ" that belongs to all of the sacred books.

INTRODUCTION TO PROCLAIMING THE WORD OF GOD

The proclaiming of the Word of God offers the assembly a direct encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, who is the true Word of God. The highlight of this section is the proclamation of the Gospel. The other elements of this part of the service are structured around the Gospel to help us hear and respond to it most fully. The readings before the Gospel present the scope of God's prior relationship with humanity and the Early Church's own understanding of Jesus.

At the most basic level, at least one non-Gospel reading is needed, along with a psalm or hymn, and a Gospel reading. Earlier prayer books had only one non-Gospel reading almost always from a New Testament Epistle, and some Rite I services use one Epistle in continuity with this practice. However, since the introduction of the latest prayer book with its Eucharistic Lectionary, most Eucharists include an Old Testament reading, a selection from the Psalms, a New Testament reading, and a Gospel Reading. Some parishes include a hymn between the New Testament reading and the Gospel, but an Alleluia verse is also common, frequently serving as music for a procession if the Gospel is read from the midst of the assembly.

Before each reading, the name of the text is announced. The Prayer Book allows the reader to say either “A Reading from” or “A Lesson from” and then to name the book. The word “lesson” in this case is derived from “lectio,” the Latin for “reading.” The two options, then, mean exactly the same thing. However, to modern ears, the word “lesson” does not mean “reading,” but most often implies a hard-earned and painful learning: think of the phrase “That will teach you a lesson.” Thus the simple English word “reading” conveys the more accurate sense.

THE FIRST READING

The First Reading is from the Old Testament. Out of respect for our Jewish brothers and sisters, and as an acknowledgment that these texts do not belong to Christians, we refer to the Old Testament as the Hebrew Scriptures or by the Jewish acronym TaNaKh “TA – NA– KH”, in which the “T” stands for Torah (the “Law” found in the “Five Books of Moses”, namely Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), the “N” for Nevi’im (the “Prophets,” covering the time from the entrance of the Israelites into the land of Israel until the Babylonian captivity of Judah and including the historical books of Kings and Chronicles, the major prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah and the minor prophets such as Amos and Hosea) and the “K” for Ketuvim (the “Writings” such as the Books of Psalms, Proverbs and Job).

The reader pauses slightly after the announcement, proclaims the text, pauses slightly again, and says the concluding statement. The concluding statement used here, “The Word of the Lord,” elicits the response from the assembly of “Thanks be to God”. In this way, the people acclaim and assent to what they have heard. Since the concluding statement is addressed to the assembly, the reader looks at the assembly while speaking and continues to look at them during the response.

THE PSALM

The psalms are discrete poems or songs that involve the relationship between God and God's people. What makes the psalms unusual, given our typical perspective on the Bible, is their direction. That is, we ordinarily consider the Bible to be God's self revelation to humanity – God's Word, revealing himself to us. The psalms, though, are prayers from humanity to God, noteworthy for their emotional vulnerability and self-disclosure – feeling often more like humanity's self-revelation to God.

Tradition asserts that King David was the author of many of the psalms. Biblical narratives about David frequently connect him with music. David was a heroic figure, an anointed leader, a cultic pioneer, but also a thoroughly flawed human being. In him we see the passionate lover, the exuberant warrior, the reverent monarch and the penitential father. We see him at his best and worst, experiencing the complete emotional range that the psalms explore.

Modern academic scholarship sees the psalms as a collection of material spanning several centuries from a diverse set of sources. Some are connected to the Temple, others reflect on the destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylon, some are connected to Court life, some are in the voice of the king and some are in the voice of the poor pleading for justice against rich oppressors. The breadth of the collection, the diversity of the voices and

the anonymity of the writers gives the sense of being in contact with the whole people of God at prayer moving through time. No other book of scripture – with the sole exception of Job – contains such intimate expressions of personal feeling – not only intimate but also uncensored in ways that sometimes both shock and offend us.

The Book of Common Prayer describes the Psalter as a body of liturgical poetry and discusses four traditional methods of recitation. Direct recitation denotes the reading or chanting of the psalm in unison. Antiphonal recitation is the verse by verse alternation between groups of singers or readers, for example, between the choir and the assembly, or between one side of the assembly and the other. Responsorial recitation is the method in which the verses of a psalm are sung by a solo voice, with the choir or assembly singing a refrain after each verse or group of verses. Responsive recitation is the method in which the reader alternates with the assembly, verse by verse.

THE SECOND READING

The Second Reading is from a New Testament non-Gospel text, either the Acts of the Apostles (from which our current reading is drawn), the Epistles or the Book of Revelation. The Epistles are some of the earliest writings in the New Testament, mostly written between 50 AD to 70 AD, likely

predating the writing of the Gospels. The Epistles are letters written by a particular leader for a particular community at a particular time. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote letters to the Churches of Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae, all cities in Greece and Asia Minor, and to the Church in Rome. It is in these letters that we learn what it means to be church: to live with each other, in the world, yet not of the world. Addressing issues arising in the early Christian communities, the texts are shaped by their particular historical and cultural contexts, but at the same time, these letters were written to us, here, today. They speak to the realities of Christian living no matter where or when we live.

THE GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

The Acclamation before the reading of the Gospel is a rite or act by itself, by which the assembly welcomes and greets the Lord who is about to speak to them in the Gospel. The Acclamation is a creedal statement, a statement of faith in Jesus. The Alleluia is sung in every season other than Lent. Alleluia comes from a Hebrew word, which can be translated as “praise God.” Since Alleluia is a word of solemn praise and rejoicing, it is not used during Lent. While the assembly has remained seated for the readings, it stands for the Gospel Acclamation. During the Gospel Acclamation, the presider takes the Gospel Book, and may process with it into the assembly, a primary symbol of Christ present in the midst of the people.

THE GOSPEL READING

The word Gospel is derived from the Anglo-Saxon term God-Spell, meaning Good News, (a rendering of the Latin evangelium) and refers to the four biblical narratives covering the life and death of Jesus, written, according to tradition, respectively, by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (known as the evangelists).

As mentioned previously, the Revised Common Lectionary reads the Gospels in a three year cycle, focusing each year on a single primary Gospel – Year A uses Matthew, Year B uses Mark and Year C uses Luke – and reading them in sequence whenever possible and interweaving John across the three for festivals.

The purpose of the Eucharistic Lectionary is mystagogical - it serves to delve deeply into one particular aspect of the mystery of Christ, usually one singled out or at least suggested by the season of the liturgical year. These readings focus on particular moments of encounter with Christ.

During the Eucharist, the Gospel is read by either a priest or a deacon. The proclamation of the Gospel from the midst of the people creates the sense that Christ is living in the midst of the assembly. It brings the members of the assembly face to face with the proclaimed Word at their center.

In some traditions, prior to the reading of the Gospel, the reader and the members of the assembly may use the thumb of the right hand to make the sign of the cross on his/her forehead, mouth and breast, and may pray to themselves “May the Word of the Lord be on my mind, on my lips and in my heart.”

At the end of the reading, the reader pauses slightly, looks at the assembly, and says “The Gospel of the Lord.” The assembly is being invited to acclaim the Lord Christ present in the event that is taking place. In other words, “The Gospel of the Lord” suggests that “You have just encountered the Gospel of the Lord, living and active.” The Gospel proclaimed in the assembly is an event – the revelation and action of Christ.

The assembly responds “Praise to you, Lord Christ.” After the assembly has acclaimed the Christ they have encountered in the proclamation, the reader may kiss the page of the Gospel Book.

SOURCES

Consultation on Common Texts. The Revised Common Lectionary: 20th Anniversary Annotated Edition (Kindle Locations 27-29). Kindle Edition.

Catholic Campus Ministry at Penn State University Website.

Book of Common Prayer.

Celebrating the Eucharist by Patrick Malloy.

Inwardly Digest: The Prayer Book as Guide to Spiritual Life by Derek Olsen.