

God's Word Spoken to Us

At the end of every reading, the lector says, “The word of the Lord,” and the people respond, “Thanks be to God.” These two phrases easily become routine. But take a moment and think about what you are saying to the people when you state this five-word proclamation: “The word of the Lord.” We believe that when we read these fragments of ancient texts selected from the Bible for the liturgy, “God speaks to his people, Christ is still proclaiming his gospel” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy 33).¹ God has chosen to use human language as a way to communicate with us.

The first thing to keep in mind is that words are human creations with many of the qualities characteristic of human beings, including the potential to bring life and joy, ambiguity and confusion, even profound sorrow and death. Like their human makers, words can be misunderstood and misinterpreted as well as consoling and comforting. The poet Anne Sexton once wrote that words are “both daisies and bruises.”² They can fall upon the mind and heart like water upon the parched earth or they can pierce the spirit like “any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow” (Heb 4:12). How they are used and what they achieve is up to those who wield them. We know the power of such simple words as “I love you” and “You can count on me” as well as the weight of such succinct phrases as “It’s over” and “She’s gone.” At their best, words take root and empower us as individuals and as a community to move toward each other in love, justice, and peace and toward God in faith, hope, and unwavering confidence.

Words are the basic building blocks of both communication and community, both of which have to do with communion, coming together in unity. When we communicate with another, we strive to enter into a meeting of minds and hearts. It does not mean there will be immediate communion with the other, but, ultimately, that is the goal of all communication. Sometimes communication only takes us to a state of mutual understanding; we know what the other is saying, although we do not agree with it. But the ancient discipline of rhetoric had as its goal to persuade those listening, to bring listeners to a common understanding and to a common purpose, to form a community of shared attitudes, values, and actions dedicated to the common good.

The playwright Tom Stoppard in his play *The Real Thing* has one of his characters say that while writers may not be sacred, *words are*.³ And so words deserve respect because if you bring the right ones together, you might move the world a little closer to peace or even create a poem that children will remember after you are gone. The words of Scripture are sacred words to those who believe; they can even evoke faith in those who do not believe. Saint Paul writes that “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). And the mission of Christ, the Word of God, was summed up on the night before

he died, when Jesus prayed, “not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (John 17:20-21).

The word of God has a particular meaning in the Roman Catholic tradition. Vatican II’s Constitution on Divine Revelation states, “Tradition and scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the word of God, which is entrusted to the church” (10). For believers baptized into the Roman Catholic Church, the word of God embraces Sacred Scripture as “the utterance of God put down as it is in writing under the inspiration of the holy Spirit” (9) and the tradition which has been handed on orally in the preaching and teaching of the Church. “Thus God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the spouse of his beloved Son. And the holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the church—and through it in the world—leads believers to the full truth and makes the word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness (see Col 3:16)” (8). It is the word of God found in Scripture that is our particular concern here.

The Word of God and the Bible

The Bible witnesses to the power and the purpose of the word of God. The power of God’s word is revealed in both creation and redemption. In the opening words of the Bible we have a testimony to the power of the word at creation when the author of Genesis writes, “Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light” (Gen 1:3). Again and again in the opening chapter we hear “Then God said . . .” followed by “And so it happened.” The power of God’s word reveals itself first as a creative word, calling forth the richness of our world from a formless wasteland. God’s word is revealed as one that shapes and designs, contains and expands, divides and diversifies. It is this creative word that also calls forth a people. “[W]ho created you, Jacob, and formed you, Israel” (Isa 43:1a)? God asks, and then goes on to remind the people of God’s power to redeem:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name: you are mine.
When you pass through waters, I will be with you;
through rivers, you shall not be swept away.
When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned,
nor will flames consume you.
For I, the LORD, am your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your savior. (Isa 43:1b-3a)

But while God’s word is active and initiates, going forth with a purpose, it also expects a response:

Yet just as from the heavens
the rain and snow come down
And do not return there
till they have watered the earth,
making it fertile and fruitful,
Giving seed to the one who sows
and bread to the one who eats,

So shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;
It shall not return to me empty,
but shall do what pleases me,
achieving the end for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10-11)

In all of this we find reflected the Hebrew understanding of the word as an event. When God speaks, something happens: creation, redemption, sanctification. God's word is an effective word, bringing about the fulfillment of what it promises.

In the New Testament, we know that "Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: 'This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). He spoke in parables about the power of the word in the imagery of a sower going out to sow seeds, and while not all the seed landed on good earth, what did reaped a rich harvest. He spoke in images of mustard seeds and lost sheep, of rebellious sons and women who did not bring enough oil for their lamps, of kings who calculated what was needed for battle and widows who badgered judges for justice. By the time the Fourth Gospel was written, Jesus himself was recognized as the word who "became flesh / and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14) and as the one who said, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63).

The Bible itself witnesses to the fact that the word of God (the Scriptures) assists in understanding *the* Word of God (Jesus). When the risen Lord appears to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he turns to the Scriptures to help them understand: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). And, similar to the Isaiah text that speaks of the fruitfulness of the word, Jesus, on the night before he died (in the great discourse in John's gospel, 13:31–17:26), after saying to his disciples that he is the vine, they the branches, and his Father the vine grower who prunes so that the branches will bear fruit, then goes on to say, "You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you" (John 15:3).

In the Second Letter to Timothy we hear about the ongoing usefulness of the word of God: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (3:16-17). Thus, the Bible offers us a dynamic portrait of God's word in various activities: creating, redeeming, instructing, correcting, encouraging, sanctifying, and shaping a people of faith, hope, and love. Is it any wonder that when it came time to reform the liturgy at the Second Vatican Council, the importance of Scripture came to the fore?

The Word of God and the Liturgy

The reading of the Scriptures during community worship has its roots in the Jewish synagogue service where the first reading was from the Torah (that is, the first five books of the Bible), followed by a reading from one of the Prophets, which served to comment on the Torah selection. In Luke 4:16-19, we have Jesus going into the synagogue at Nazareth on the Sabbath, taking up the scroll, and reading from the text of Isaiah 61:1, "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, / because the LORD has anointed me; / He has sent me to bring good news to the

afflicted.” The Christian community kept this tradition of reading from the Sacred Scripture when it gathered to celebrate the Eucharist. In the earliest description of what took place on Sunday, St. Justin Martyr wrote in the mid-second century a description of the service: “On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or in the outlying districts, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time.”⁴ He goes on to describe the rest of the service, including preaching, universal prayer, the presentation of bread and wine, a prayer of thanksgiving, and reception of the eucharistic elements. From the beginning, the word of God was part of the community’s worship.

As a boy growing up in the 1950s, I can remember being told that in order to satisfy the obligation of Sunday Mass you had to be in the church by the reading of the gospel. (Others remember the “deadline” being the taking of the veil from the chalice at what was then called the offertory of the Mass.) At that time Catholics were only beginning to be encouraged to read the Bible, or at least to have a missal to read the English translation of the readings during the Mass while the priest read them in Latin. But “going to Mass” was then equated with being present for “the principal parts of the Mass”: the offertory, the consecration, and Communion. It was not until the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, promulgated in 1963, that we returned to an understanding of the Mass as composed of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, two parts forming one holy action.

The Constitution proclaims the many ways in which Christ is present during liturgical celebrations: “He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass both in the person of his minister . . . and most of all in the eucharistic species. . . . He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church. Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them’ ” (7). The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* expanded on this recognition of the presence of Christ in the Word, noting that “in the readings, as explained by the Homily, God speaks to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offering spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself is present through his word in the midst of the faithful” (55).

The image of the Word as a form of nourishment is especially pertinent, for it invited Roman Catholics to recognize the centrality of the table of the Word as equal to the table of the Eucharist: “The Church is nourished spiritually at the twofold table of God’s word and of the Eucharist: from the one it grows in wisdom and from the other in holiness. In the word of God the divine covenant is announced; in the Eucharist the new and everlasting covenant is renewed. On the one hand the history of salvation is brought to mind by means of human sounds; on the other it is made manifest in the sacramental signs of the Liturgy” (Introduction to the Lectionary, 10).

The recognition, that is, the “knowing-again” of the presence of Christ in the word, led to the decision to offer the community of faith a greater exposure to the Bible. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy declared, “The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way the more

significant part of the sacred scriptures will be read to the people over a fixed number of years” (51). The result of this declaration was the *Lectionary for Mass* with its expanded offering of texts for all the Sunday, weekday, and special occasion liturgical celebrations.

The Word of God and the Lectionary

A lectionary has been defined as “a book or list of readings of scripture for the church year.”⁵ The Lectionary is not the same thing as the Bible. As Andrew D. Ciferni so cogently expressed, lectionaries “are creations of the churches. The Scriptures are inspired; lectionaries are not.”⁶ Lectionaries go back to the fifth and sixth centuries. The earliest forms contained ordered listings of selections that would be proclaimed on Sundays and feasts. Martin Connell writes that during this time when all texts were handwritten, “there was usually one sacred book for each worshiping community, and in the margins of that book were markers saying things like ‘Start here’ or ‘Stop here.’”⁷ Lectionaries organized more systematically according to the liturgical year and with full readings began to appear in the thirteenth century. But it was the Council of Trent (1545–63) that provided the Lectionary that determined most Catholics’ exposure to Scripture for almost four centuries. The readings selected for the Missal of Pius V help us appreciate all the more the richness and variety we now have in the revised Lectionary of 1969.

The Missal of Pius V had a one-year Sunday Lectionary cycle. Each year the same 120 passages from Scripture would be heard on Sundays and holy days of obligation. Of the forty-six books of the Old Testament, selections came from only ten of them, but not one Old Testament reading was assigned to Sundays. Most Catholics, then, had little, if any, exposure to the Old Testament, which provides the foundation for any understanding of the New Testament. From the New Testament, seventeen of the twenty-seven books provided readings, but nothing from the book of Revelation or eight of the shorter letters. As for the gospels, all four were represented, but the most readings came from Matthew (24) and Luke (21), followed by John (17), and then Mark (4).⁸ The result is that Catholics would hear during the year about 17 percent of the New Testament and—if one attended Mass on Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil—about 1 percent of the Old Testament. As for weekdays, either the two readings from the previous Sunday—one from the letters of the New Testament and one from the gospels—were repeated at daily Masses, or a Requiem Mass was celebrated with its own readings, except during Lent and certain feasts of the saints, which had their own readings.

The 1969 revised *Lectionary for Mass*, then, was one of the major liturgical accomplishments of Vatican II. It offered a far more expansive selection from both the Old and New Testaments, providing that “richer fare” at the table of the Word that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy called for. A three-year Sunday and festive cycle offers three readings: the first from the Old Testament (except during the Easter season when Acts of the Apostles is read); a second reading from an apostle (either from a letter or from the book of Revelation, depending on the season); and the third reading from one of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke each having a year in the Sunday cycle during Ordinary Time with John featured during the liturgical seasons, especially Lent and Easter, and for several weeks during the Sunday B

cycle). In the course of the three-year Sunday cycle, every New Testament book is given some exposure, except for 2 and 3 John and Jude, which do show up in the weekday readings. The major feasts of the Lord, of Mary, and of certain saints—Peter and Paul, John the Baptist—also have special readings.

The 1997 revised edition of the *Lectionary for Mass* (Second Typical Edition) in four volumes offers further refinements, additional texts, and a new layout, although with little substantial change in the selections. The four volumes are divided in the following way:

Volume I: Sundays (Cycles A, B, C), Solemnities, Feasts of the Lord and the Saints

Volume II: Proper of Seasons for Weekdays—Year I, Proper of the Saints, Common of the Saints

Volume III: Proper of Seasons for Weekdays—Year II, Proper of the Saints, Common of the Saints

Volume IV: Common of Saints, Ritual Masses, Masses for Various Needs and Occasions, Votive Masses, and Masses for the Dead

Lectors will usually be involved with the first three volumes dealing with Sunday (vol. I) and weekday celebrations of the liturgy (vols. II and III). However, it is good to be aware of the fourth volume and how it is arranged.

Since 1993 there has also been a *Lectionary for Masses with Children*, intended “as a means of enabling children to participate in liturgical celebrations.”² This Lectionary contains simplified language and carefully chosen Scripture passages and its goal is to enable children to celebrate *their* faith in relation to their age and developmental level and to gradually lead children into the worship of the adult Christian community. The Introduction to the *Lectionary for Masses with Children* notes that it adheres as closely as possible to the selection and arrangement of readings found in the *Lectionary for Mass*, while adapting them to the needs of children (11). Furthermore, keeping in mind the entire assembly, the Introduction clearly states that it “should not be used exclusively or even preferentially at Sunday Masses, even though large numbers of children are present” (13).

Two principles govern the order of readings for Sundays and festive days; they are called the principles of “harmony” and of “semi-continuous reading.” The principle of harmony comes into play during Ordinary Time in the choice of the first reading to correlate with or in some way prefigure the gospel of the day. There is harmony of another kind between all three readings chosen during Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, according to the character of each season: Advent with its themes of the first and second comings of the Lord; Christmas with its focus on the mystery of the incarnation; Lent with its emphasis on Christian initiation, repentance, conversion, and the history of salvation; and Easter with its recounting of the various appearances of the risen Lord, the early church’s witness and growth, and living out of Easter faith in today’s world. The principle of “semi-continuous reading” governs the gospels and second readings of the Sundays of Ordinary Time, during which a book will be read straight through, though not every chapter and verse.

The structure of the Sunday Liturgy of the Word includes the first reading, the responsorial

psalm, the second reading, an alleluia with verse, and the gospel. There is a deliberate pacing called for in the Liturgy of the Word to benefit its being heard by the community: listening, silence, response (responsorial psalm), listening, silence, preparation for the gospel (alleluia), listening to the gospel, preaching, silence, universal prayer. Ideally there is an interplay between proclamation and silence, spoken word and sung response. The Liturgy of the Word can be truly seen as a concelebrated liturgy with parts played by priest (the homily), deacon (the gospel), lectors (first and second readings), cantor (responsorial psalm), and the community who listens, reflects, responds, and sings. Furthermore, the integrity of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist can be seen in how the community moves from hearing the word of God in Scripture and the homily, thereby coming to recognize God's ongoing and active presence in our lives, to giving thanks for that gracious presence in the prayer of Eucharist, and then partaking in Holy Communion with the Lord and one another.

The two-year weekday cycle during Ordinary Time provides a semi-continuous reading of two texts, with a two-year cycle for the first reading and a one-year cycle for the gospels. The seasons of Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter have their own one-year cycle of weekday readings. Provision is also made for readings for the celebration of the saints recognized in the universal calendar, and also for Masses for special occasions and intentions, and the liturgical celebrations of the other sacraments.

What holds the readings together in all seasons is what God has done for us in Christ, most notably in the saving mysteries of the incarnation and the paschal mystery of Christ's dying and rising. While more can be said about the Lectionary, a final word of advice would be to take time to become familiar with how it is set up. Start with the *Lectionary for Mass* for Sundays (vol. I). A further suggestion would be to read the Introduction to the Lectionary, found in all four volumes, to understand more fully the vision and principles on which it is based.

The Word of God and the Lector

The word of God, as found in the Bible and organized in the Lectionary, serves the prayer life of the Christian community in the course of the liturgical year. This word comes to the lector in the form of print on the page. While we say in faith, "The word of the Lord" or "The Gospel of the Lord" after every reading, the act of reading also remains an event of human communication. Between the text and the community stands the lector. Whether one approaches reading as a job, a ministry, a vocation, or all three, there is a need for human engagement on the part of the lector with the texts. "In the beginning was the Word," the Gospel of John declares in its magnificent prologue (1:1). And that remains true every Sunday. In the beginning of the worship service is the word, waiting to be spoken and heard. It waits to become flesh—first, the flesh of the lector, then the flesh of the community. It needs to be embodied to be a living word, embodied in speech and action. And that leads us to the ministry of the lector.

Scripture must be communicated as a word of life, a weighty word that allows God to reach out and touch our hearts, to make contact with our souls, to transform us into the full stature of our status as children of God. For this to happen, lectors must prepare. And this preparation is twofold: spiritual and technical. The word of God to us will only reach its destination if it

becomes the word of God *through* us. One instrument that God has chosen to communicate through when the people of God gather for worship is the lector. Let us now consider some of the steps that help us to fulfill God's plan.

KEEP IN MIND

- Words are the basic building blocks of both communication and community, both of which have to do with communion, coming together in unity.
- “Tradition and scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the word of God, which is entrusted to the church” (Constitution on Divine Revelation 10).
- The Bible offers us a dynamic portrait of God's word in various activities: creating, redeeming, instructing, correcting, encouraging, sanctifying, and shaping a people of faith, hope, and love.
- “The Church is nourished spiritually at the twofold table of God's word and of the Eucharist: from the one it grows in wisdom and from the other in holiness” (Introduction to the Lectionary, 10).
- A deliberate pacing is called for in the Liturgy of the Word to assure that the community hears the word of God: listening, silence, response (responsorial psalm), listening, silence, preparation for the gospel (alleluia), listening, preaching, silence, universal prayer. Silence is frequently neglected.
- God's word waits to become flesh—first, the flesh of the lector, then the flesh of the community.