

Hearing the Word of God



When the Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself is speaking to his people and Christ, present in his own word, is proclaiming the Gospel. (GIRM, n.29) These words from the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* set before us a profound truth that we need to ponder and make our own.

The words of Sacred Scripture are unlike any other texts we will ever hear, for they not only give us information, they are the vehicle God uses to reveal himself to us, the means by which we come to know the depth of God's love for us and the responsibilities entailed by being Christ's followers, members of his Body. What is more, this Word of God proclaimed in the liturgy possesses a special sacramental power to bring about in us what it proclaims. The Word of God proclaimed at Mass is 'efficacious' that is, it not only tells us of God and God's will for us, it also helps us to put that will of God into practice in our own lives.

How, then, do we respond to this wonderful gift of God's Word? We respond in word and song, in posture and gesture, in silent meditation and, most important of all, by listening attentively to that Word as it is proclaimed. Following each reading we express our gratitude for this gift with the words '*Thanks be to God*' or, in the case of the Gospel, '*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ,*' and it is appropriate that a brief period of silence be observed to allow for personal reflection. Following the first reading we sing the Responsorial Psalm, a meditation on God's word through the inspired words of one of the psalms from the psalter, the Bible's prayer book.

The Gospel is the highpoint of the Liturgy of the Word. The readings from the Old Testament tell us of God's promises and his preparation of his people for the coming of his Son; the epistles and other pre-Gospel New Testament readings offer the reflections of St. Paul and other contemporaries of the Lord on the life and message of Christ; in the Acts of the Apostles we have a history of the early Church. We believe that all Scripture, the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by the Holy Spirit, but the Church has always given special honor to the Gospel because in the Gospel we have not simply the preparation for and prefiguring of Christ, nor reflections on his message, but the words and deeds of Christ himself. The proclamation of the Gospel is surrounded with marks of respect and honor: the Gospel is read by an ordained minister, the deacon, or, when no deacon is present, by a priest; the Book of the Gospels is carried aloft with honor in the entrance procession and placed on the altar until the Gospel reading to show the unity of Scripture and Eucharist, of the table of the Word and the table of the Christ's body and blood; just before the Gospel is read the Gospel book is carried in procession to the ambo to the accompaniment of an acclamation sung by the people; it may be incensed before the reading and is kissed at its conclusion; finally, all stand as the Gospel is proclaimed. Through this posture and through the honor paid to the book containing the Gospel, the Church pays homage to Christ who is present in his Word and who proclaims his Gospel.

What then must we do to properly receive the Word of God proclaimed at Mass? The *General Instruction* tells us that *all must listen with reverence to the readings from God's word*. (GIRM, no. 29) and it provides that those who read the Scriptures must be *truly suited to perform this function and should receive careful preparation, so that the faithful by listening to the readings from the sacred texts may develop in their hearts a warm and living love for Sacred Scripture*. (GIRM, no. 101)

The key word in all of this is *listening*. We are called to *listen* attentively as the reader, deacon or priest proclaims God's Word. Unless one is unable to hear, one should not be reading along with a text from a missal or missalette. Rather, taking our cue from the *General Instruction* itself, we should *listen* as we would if Christ himself were standing at the ambo, for in fact it *is* God who speaks when the Scriptures are proclaimed. Carefully following along with the printed word can cause us to miss the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit, the message that the Spirit may have for us in one of the passages because we are anxious to 'keep up,' to move along with the reader.

Perhaps the best way to understand the readings at Mass and our response to them is offered by Pope John Paul II in his Instruction *Dies Domini*. He encourages *those who take part in the Eucharist, priest, ministers and faithful ... to prepare the Sunday liturgy, reflecting beforehand upon the Word of God which will be proclaimed* and adds that if we do not, *it is difficult for the liturgical proclamation of the Word of God alone to produce the fruit we might expect*. (n. 40) In this way we till the soil, preparing our souls to receive the seeds to be planted by the Word of God so that seed may bear fruit.

The Word of God, then calls for our listening and our response in silent reflection, as well as in word and song. Most important of all, the Word of God, which is living and active, calls each of us individually and all of us together for a response that moves beyond the liturgy itself and affects our daily lives, leading us to engage fully in the task of making Christ known to the world by all that we do and say.