

The Church's Lectionary

Let us begin with the most positive statement we can make about the Catholic liturgy as a space for hearing the Word of God.

The Church's understanding of God is based firmly on the Bible and on the tide of its traditions, which flows through history in teaching - preserved in the writings of the Fathers, the great monastic traditions, and the theologians - but above all in the Liturgy itself, in which we too, both individually, and by our belonging to our liturgical community, become upholders of, and contributors to, the Church's tradition. It's clear that one of the factors which established the Canon of the New Testament - what was in and what was out - was precisely the capacity of the various documentary candidates to serve as liturgical reading-matter.

I'd like us to think about this in more detail: for example, the Acts of the Apostles says that the first three thousand converts to Christ *remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood* (that is, the sharing of goods) *to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers*. This bedrock tradition is witnessed-to over succeeding centuries; the presence in the Church today of an ecclesiastical ordinance which says that *all Catholics must attend Mass every Sunday* embodies it in Church law; but it's the heaving off the bed of your body and mine on a Sunday morning that makes it the tradition of the Church in 2004, just as it is in the power of every lapsed Catholic to witness against the reality of this "tradition of the Church" by staying in bed. The very same thing can be said of every lighting of candles, every opening of Lectionaries, every bringing to the altar of bread, wine, and the brotherhood. We should never think that there is a "tradition of the Church" that is above and beyond the actual practice of us, and people like us. This is nothing new or surprising.

But the same can be said of our Scriptural inheritance, particularly that of the New Testament. Remember that for the first forty to seventy years of its history, depending where you lived, the Church was managing without any written Gospel. It was the oral (*i.e.*, unwritten) tradition that upheld the mission and life of the Church through those years, so far as we know unaided by Christian Scriptures as we now understand them.

This fact is not much reflected-on by Christians of a Protestant bent, because it confirms the Catholic understanding of the Church, whereby Scripture and Tradition *still* run together as contributors to the body of Revelation. This is a fact of which we can have palpable experience. I remember, when I was a theology student in Rome, when my mind was full of all kinds of jarring and jangling theories and questions, which the week's work had generated, coming to Mass on Sundays. On the day of rest, I was used to finding that the sense of imbalance and distortion that this way of life sometimes creates in my brain would become ordered and obedient in the atmosphere of the Mass, as the scattered fragments of argument were laid straight in the sight of God, who is above any confusion and ignorance. It was a different coinage, a different dimension. I realised that my very limited view of the truth never interfered with the Truth itself, and that God could liberate me from my maze of human questions, without ever entering into it himself.

It has always been so. Job wanders in and out of his agonised questions for thirty-seven chapters, and at the end of them *God addresses him*. What God says is on a different level from Job's questions, which remain unanswered. He simply says, *I am God, and you are my creature*. He says this pretty loudly, *speaking from the heart of the tempest*; but he says nothing more than that. And it is enough. In the same way, we may be in all kinds of

perplexity and have a deep sense of our ignorance of God. But in the liturgy *God addresses us*. We may not receive, in any detailed way that we could put into words, the answers to all our questions. But we still believe that there are answers, that these are known to God, and that God is in touch with us insofar as we can receive what he has to tell us. There are things, as Jesus told us, that *would be too much for us now*: and John's letter reminds us that *what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed*. But we are at the same time *already children of God, to whom the Son has made the Father known, and will continue to make him known*. We are content to submit humbly to this process that is unfinished, trusting that it is leading us on to the day when we shall have no more questions to ask.

We remembered at the beginning of this series that the liturgy of the Word is founded on the experience of Jesus in the Synagogue. The Synagogue liturgy was made up of reading, preaching, and prayer. The prayers, especially after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, took the place and the spirit of the Temple worship, making of the prayer a spiritual sacrifice. This is a lesson the Jews had learned much earlier, during the Exile in Babylon, where the exiles said, in the words of Azariah in the book of Daniel,

Lord, now we are the least of all the nations, now we are despised throughout the world, today, because of our sins. We have at this time no leader, no prophet, no prince, no holocaust, no sacrifice, no oblation, no incense, no place where we can offer you the first-fruits, and win your favour. But may the contrite soul, the humbled spirit be as acceptable to you as holocausts of rams and bullocks, and thousands of fattened lambs: such may our sacrifice be to you today. And may it be your will that we follow you wholeheartedly, since those who put their trust in you will not be disappointed.

This spiritualising of the Temple liturgy is what gave the Jews their huge emphasis on home liturgy like the Sabbath ritual, on personal holiness and dietary fidelity, on circumcision, which came to be understood as the solemn marking-out of the individual human body as a kind of promised land. In the midst of a foreign world, the Jew himself, his home and family, become the Holy Land. So in the synagogue Jesus would have learned this kind of spiritualised holiness, and would have seen the readings, sermons, and prayers as feeding his Jewish religion in an occupied Holy Land. The psalms were seen as especially important in establishing the right atmosphere for prayer. The famous Eighteen Prayers, still said by Jews in our own time three times a day, ask for knowledge, forgiveness, health and wealth, the fulfilment of messianic hopes, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the restoration of the Temple sacrifices on mount Zion, and for peace. Even when the Temple had gone, the prayers were always timed for the former hour of sacrifice, and recited facing Jerusalem. Yet the loss of the Temple, and the creation of the spiritualised faith, brought nearer the day of the Incarnation, when *those who worship the Father will worship him, neither in Jerusalem nor on this mountain, but in spirit and on truth*.

On Sabbath and festivals in the Synagogue, readings from the Torah and the Prophets were essential. About the time of our Lord the Hebrew texts had been translated into Aramaic, so that he would have been among the first generations to hear that Targum translation. Other regions, out in the Mediterranean basin, would have used the Septuagint Greek. The reading of the Torah, the first five books or "books of Moses", had the pride of place, and the Torah is divided into weekly portions over a whole year. The homilies, largely expounding the sacred text, would be preached by the rabbis. You can see straight away that the treatment of the Torah is the template for our treatment of the Gospel.

It is very important to remember that Jewish religion was, and is, much more about what you do than what you believe. Of course there are core beliefs which Jews have to share. But strict uniformity about speculative theology wasn't imposed on Jews. They found the words

of Scripture to be normative, and became a religion of the book. This meant that lay people could study the Bible themselves, and this they did, eagerly. So although priests were the official interpreters of matters of the Law, the possibility was there for lay leaders and interpreters to arise; and they did. In turn, ordinary lay people had to make decisions about how they would go about keeping the law: lay people interpreting divine law for themselves! Pharisees, for instance, should not be regarded as priests or Rabbis: they were not ordained, but laymen, who held many theological beliefs that differed from those current among priests. You can immediately see how important this was when the priests were wiped out and the Temple fallen; the religion could and did survive and flourish. Also, this meant that Jewish religion was internalised to an amazing extent, unparalleled in the ancient world. Its highest category of duty was *piety* - a matter of behaviour. An orthodox Jew gets his actions into order. The Torah will give him correct advice about every area of life, from planting crops to sexual morality. Thus piety, rather than ethical standards, is the point.

You can tell that this means your average layman has to know his Bible and carry this knowledge with him. This was the aim of the Synagogue service. Within reason every Jew could work out his own way of keeping the Torah, and there was very little that any ordained authority could do to stop him.

When you think about it, this situation - so foreign to the mentality of the Catholic Church until quite recently - is actually all expressed in the Bible, where God's word very frequently appears from outside the formal structures of religion and state. The prophets arise like a forest fire, unqualified by any human license or office, and they can overbid royal or priestly power again and again. The stock experience of royalty expressed in the great Deuteronomistic history is that the Kings needed prophets to shoot them down and stop them in their tracks: one thinks of David and Nathan, when David had sinned, or when he had decided to build a Temple: and Elijah v. Ahaz and Jezebel is also a good case in point. Moses himself has to struggle not only against the properly-labelled enemy - Pharaoh - but also against the embittered and despairing slaves he was trying to liberate. The great, awesomely lonely figures of Ezekiel and Jeremiah consecrate the notion that God's will is seldom done as part of Public Building and Works. Individuals keep arising who carry the whole plot in their hands. We are approaching our Christian meditation on the rôle of St Joseph, who holds the fate of salvation history in his hands, when he dreams his dream about the identity of the baby his fiancée is expecting, and decides to obey his dream rather than his excellent common sense. We might also recall Jesus to Peter, *Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah: it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven*; and in the early Church, Paul is forced to contradict Peter on the very nature of the Church Jesus had built on him, to let the Gentiles be Gentiles and not Jews.

This means that, in the readings from the prophets, in the history books, and in the Psalms, Jesus and his co-religionists had a constant diet of Scripture which taught them to mistrust the human powers around them, and to expect the call of God to come from outside their experience, as it had to Moses and to the prophets. Sharing in this view of revelation was probably an essential part of Jesus' training in obedience to God rather than to men.

What is our intention when we Christians read the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament?

It isn't just to give us some interesting lessons in comparative religion. It is primarily to set us down beside Jesus of Nazareth: not, as when we read the Gospel, as pupils round the feet of their Master, but as fellow-disciples, listening to the Word of God, as he did in those mysterious years of what we call his "hidden life". We have only one small window into those years, in an unknown hand, writing nine verses now incorporated into Luke's Gospel. These lines show us Jesus, at Bar-mitzvah age, abandoning his family in Jerusalem, and being found after three days amongst the Doctors of the Law - *listening to them and asking them questions*.

Notice those verbs! *Listening*, as we listen to the Old Testament with him. *Asking questions* - because his listening opens new horizons for him, leading him to seek for new knowledge. *All those who heard him were astonished at his intelligence and his replies*. After this bright scene the curtain closes over Jesus until the baptismal scenes with which all the Gospels have their narrative beginnings. But already we can sense the growing in him of a response to the God who addresses us; and this is expressed, not on the hillside and alone, but in the Temple, amongst the Doctors: it is within the community, within the Liturgy, that this communication takes place. Jesus is learning, preparing to be a prophet: not only listening, but already replying, *in an astonishing way*, to what he is taught. There is the kind of “active listening” we were talking about in our first meeting. From this dialogue with the Old Testament, Jesus discerned his vocation, which is also his nature, to be the Light of the World, the True Bread, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Son of God. This is what makes the Old Testament essential reading for us: it is holy ground, and should make us spiritually take off our shoes, because it is the place where God addresses his Son.

There is a form of response to the Old Testament, much displayed by students for the Diaconate, which I refer to as “anti-Semitism”, and I’m only half joking. This is the cast of their minds which allows them to listen to the Old Testament with a superior attitude, always expecting to find it defective in the wisdom of Christianity, always ready to find moral or spiritual shortcomings in what they read. If asked they will admit that it is the Word of God, but they will suggest that now we are Christian it is out of date. We should remember that the Old Testament represents the school in which the Son of God learned obedience, learned God. The God who spoke to Moses is the same God who called his Son to take up the Cross. Jesus died with the words of the Old Testament on his lips. What was good enough for him is good enough for us, and we therefore read the Old Testament with the same total attention that he gave to it.

A few weeks ago I stood before the flight of stone stairs Constantine carried from the Holy Land to Rome, and installed opposite the Cathedral of the Lateran. He did this because they were the stairs of the Praetorium, Pilate’s headquarters in Jerusalem. He did it because he was sure that Jesus had walked up these stairs to meet his Roman trial before the prefect. He knew the stones were sacred, and that whoever stands on them is standing where Jesus had stood. I think his devotion can instruct us about the Psalms.

In the most intimate way we should make the Psalter our prayer because it was Jesus’ prayer. Our prayers all end with the words *through Jesus Christ our Lord*. We can make our prayer one with the Psalms as he prayed them. When we make these words our own, we can be sure that the images and movement we experience in them lived in his mind too. When we pray “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall want nothing” we can be *completely* sure that we are standing where Jesus stood in his life on earth: not on the stone steps of the Scala Sancta, but in the spiritual Temple where he lifted up his mind and heart to God the Father. The echoes in our mind are the resonances he knew as well. In our effort to imitate him, nothing is more helpful than this.

There is someone else whom we should remember as we pray the Psalter. King David is the moral author of the Psalter, and the poetry of the Psalms often evokes his life as well as his thoughts. Traditionally David was the king God loved, and he responded by obedience - mostly - but also by devotion. He was always ready to pray, and he wrote the Psalter not to be recited but to be sung. This lyrical element in David’s relation to God is a sustained tradition; he played and sang and even danced before God: *I will sing to him all my days, make music to my God while I live*. When we set words to music we release them to fly, and such is the real language of the Psalter. The Instruction of the Lectionary says:

As a rule the responsorial psalm should be sung. There are two established ways of singing the psalm after the first reading: responsorially or directly. In responsorial singing which, as far as possible, is to be given preference, the psalmist or cantor of the psalm sings the psalm verse, and the whole congregation joins in by singing the response.

We should do our level best to sing them, until the very quoting of their words raises music in our mind. When Jesus is called “Son of David” this singing harmony should be evoked for us in him: remember that, at the end of the Last Supper, they all sang the Hallel psalms before setting out for the Mount of Olives, and Gethsemane. Jesus’ life was harmonised with the eternal life of the Father. In him people heard the music of the spheres.

The Gospel Acclamation is called by the Lectionary “a rite or act standing by itself”. The Instruction reads: *It must be sung, and during it all stand. It is not to be sung only by the Cantor who intones it or by the choir, but by the whole congregation together.*

This leads us to the Gospel itself, the heart of the Christian proclamation, because it delivers the normative account of the life of Jesus, his words and deeds, but most vitally the memory of his death and resurrection. In this, we Catholics can glimpse that sacramental nature of the Word most clearly: the first thing we say after the consecration at the Mass is:

Father, we celebrate the memory of Christ, your Son; we, your people and your ministers recall his Passion, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into glory. (*Roman Canon*)

In memory of his death and resurrection (prayer 2)

Father, calling to mind the death your Son endured for us, his glorious resurrection and his ascension into heaven (prayer 3)

Father, we now celebrate this memorial of our redemption. We recall Christ’s death, his descent among the dead, his resurrection, and his ascension to your right hand (prayer 4)

It is agreed amongst all scholars that the first part of the Gospel to be written down, the first to achieve a broadly co-ordinated verbal form, was the Passion story itself; because this formed the core of the *kerygma*, the Church’s proclaimed message. Long before anyone collected the sayings of Jesus into an ordered body of his teaching, the story of his dying was fixed in the Christian memory as the heart of the message. Long before the memory of miracles was gathered, and certainly three generations before any account of his birth was written down, the facts of the Passion were established as the very heart of the tradition. As the Eucharist fulfilled the command, *Do this in memory of Me*, the Passion story was being told as the essential Gospel, which they were to use to *teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*. In the story of the Passion, we hear the heart of the Gospel. This hearing provides the verbal element for the Eucharist, and the sacramental action which fulfils Jesus’ last will and testament cannot take place without the words spoken. From the beginning the word within the Eucharist has been likened to the breath of God, the Spirit who moves across the waters of chaos, to begin the story of creation. The words of Jesus spoken over the inert matter of the bread and the cup begin a new Creation in the sacramental order; in this food of the earth, God begins to recreate us. Therefore we enter into the death of Christ, in order to be reborn with him as a new people, with eternal destiny.

Those of you who have studied a few Roman documents will know that they are delivered in a heavy style which doesn’t easily recommend them for wide diffusion among the faithful.

However, I would like you to hear this sentence about the function of the president during the liturgy of the Word:

The one presiding is to make use of the various options provided in the Lectionary regarding readings, responses, responsorial psalms, and Gospel acclamations, but he is to do so with the agreement of all concerned and after listening to the faithful in regard of what belongs to them.

I hope you can appreciate from this that the Lectionary is, thank Heaven, not minded simply to dictate what form and content the Liturgy of the Word should have. Rather, there should be many uses of judgment *on behalf of the faithful*, so that the Word of God may better be delivered. This means that you should become aware of the options presented in the Lectionary, and help your Pastor to use them in the way that will best help your life of faith.

Now I come to introduce something less positive into your mind. All of the preceding talk notwithstanding, we find a tendency in our reading of Scripture to accrue the meaning we give it from our past as a Church. This can reach a point where we no longer hear what God wants to say to us. I mentioned anti-Semitism. When we read the appalling curses which Jesus delivers on the Scribes and Pharisees in Mt 23, we are listening to the resonant weaponry of the great schism of the first century, where the Synagogue and the Church separated in acrimony and hatred. The Church had a rough birth and a tumultuous teenage in a very short space of time, and the end of the story was a bitter one. The Apocalypse glories in the triumphs of the faith over its enemies, easily equating the Christian cause with the reign of God. The Gospel tradition itself is strewn with the débris of this battle. Did Jesus deliver these terrible curses? He was consciously a prophet, and prophets' words are often couched in this way. But has the bitterness deepened in the telling and the memory? Did Jesus actually separate himself from his opponents in the way Matthew suggests, and which reaches its firmest account in John, whose Jesus addresses his opponents as "you Jews"?

When we read these curses, do we deflect their force towards the long-dead Pharisees of the first century, so that they pass harmlessly over our heads? The tradition of the Church certainly *has* done; but we should break into this tradition with what our history has taught us: that allowing the Gospel to stand against the Jewish people leads to Holocaust. It is clear that our listening has to be refined and deepened in its sense that God speaks to us *now*. The meaning of the Scriptural text is not fixed in concrete or there to be discovered once and for all. It is a living word which can reveal itself in new meaning, whenever it is heard with the requisite openness, by a congregation ready to be changed by it into something new.

Therefore the aim and technique of our treatment of the Word must include an ever-increasing openness to the transcendent, to the power of God to lift us out of the ruts into which respect for tradition and memory can land us. The essential condition for hearing the Word must always be the uncomfortable sense that it is we who are addressed by it.