

The Mystery of Faith

#2: WORD

April 30, 2006

In this YEAR OF PRAYER AND RENEWAL, the entire parish has an opportunity to reflect on the rich mysteries of our faith, with a focus on our greatest prayer, the Mass. A spoken reflection at each Mass and a series of bulletin inserts will help us explore the Mass more deeply during this Eastertide. **In this issue, we'll explore the Liturgy of the Word.** You are invited to continue the discussion after the morning Masses at the coffee hour.

Storytelling

"Storytelling is the single most important energy of all religious celebration," writes Father Eugene Walsh, SS.

"Storytelling lies at the heart of worship." On the first Holy Thursday, Jesus gathered in the upper room with his disciples for a specific reason: to celebrate the Passover, to join in the ritual retelling of the story of how the Hebrews became God's chosen people. And within the context of that story, Jesus began to tell a new story, by taking bread and wine and sharing his very self with his disciples.

Today, it is in the context of Christ's story that our own stories unfold. As we celebrate the Liturgy of Word, "we don't leave our lives and our moment in history behind as we listen to these stories from the past; we actually take them up anew in the light of the Word we have heard. The story of our lives is seen to be part of a larger story—the story that the Bible tells" (Driscoll). In the proclamation of the scriptures at Mass, ancient wisdom and long-ago wonders are made present; and the words of prophets once again await their fulfillment, in our own place and time.

The Table of the Word

We say "Amen" to the opening prayer of the Mass. All are seated. The readers and psalmist proceed to the ambo. We have taken our places around the table of the Word.

The readings we share at this table are not chosen at random; in fact, they are not 'chosen' at all: they are drawn from a book of readings known as the Lectionary. The Lectionary was developed in

response to the Second Vatican Council, which in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* called for a more plentiful sharing of the scriptures at the table of the word. Arranged in a three-year cycle, the Lectionary provides three readings (and a psalm) for each Sunday of the year. In the course of three years we hear almost the entirety of the New Testament, and a good portion of the Old.



Who Wrote the Bible?

At the beginning of each reading, we are given a short introduction which tells us who wrote it: "A reading from the book of the Prophet Isaiah," for example. But at the end of the reading, a new attribution is made: this is "the word of the Lord," chants the reader, not in the past but in the present tense. Is there a

contradiction here? Yes, but a wonderful one, which illuminates our Catholic understanding of the sacred Scriptures. For these sacred writers, chosen by God, were not simply saintly secretaries, taking dictation from above. Rather, they "made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though God acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written" (*Dei Verbum*). They wrote in the language and the forms of their day; they used images and concepts familiar to their audience. That is why it is so important that we understand who wrote the text, in what setting, and to whom.

Living Words

The scriptures proclaimed in the liturgy of the word exist, then, on an historical level. But the liturgy is not a history lesson. In the liturgy, what is proclaimed becomes present by the power of the Holy Spirit. "The Word proclaimed in liturgy is not some pale reflection or residue of the event proclaimed there. It is the whole reality to which the words bear testimony made present" (Driscoll). These words—written long ago by Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or Paul, or Luke, or John—are truly God's

word, spoken to us, here and now. "Jesus has something to say to this assembly. Jesus is not just delivering a general message for the world at large.... Jesus is there precisely to speak to these people in this moment about the needs of the moment." (Walsh) God speaks; and the Christian people respond, with hearts full of gratitude: "Thanks be to God!"

It is at this table of the living word that those preparing for baptism are nourished week after week. Only after baptism do they stay for the Liturgy of Eucharist. The very word "catechumen" means "hearer." The Liturgy of the Word is truly the school for disciples.

The Gospel

The reading of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. We stand. Servers with candles stream to the altar. The priest carries the Gospel book in solemn procession to the ambo. During this procession, we sing. "We are an Easter people," says St. Augustine, "and alleluia is our song." We sing alleluia, our resurrection song, because in the proclamation of the Gospel we meet the risen Christ. "Jesus rose from the dead with the whole life he once lived rising with him.... every word that Jesus spoke, every action he performed, can be present to us because it rose with him" (Driscoll).

We also acknowledge Christ's risen presence in the dialogue we now exchange with the priest. Once again, as the beginning of the Mass, he reminds us that God is with us: "The Lord be with you." (This dialogue takes place four times during the Mass—



always at important moments, to mark the beginning of something new.) And this time, when the reading is announced, we respond with an acclamation of praise: "Glory to you, O Lord!"

That acclamation is accompanied by the sign of the cross, made in a special way. The priest draws a cross on the open pages of the Gospel book, and then, with the whole assembly, marks his forehead, lips, and heart with the cross. This gesture is in itself a prayer, as we ask Christ to open our minds to understand, our lips to speak, and our hearts to believe his Gospel. After the Gospel reading, we join in another acclamation: "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ!" We speak directly to Christ, whom we acknowledge as present in the words of his Gospel, spoken long ago, but renewed this day and "fulfilled in our hearing."

Visit www.stjames-cathedral.org/prayer to read more!
Next week: Eucharist—Thanksgiving.

Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy

FOR FURTHER READING

- Joseph Champlin. *The Mystery and Meaning of the Mass.**
- Lucien Deiss. *The Mass.**
- Jeremy Driscoll. *What Happens at Mass.**
- *At Home with the Word**
- *Catholic Study Bible**

**Look for these titles in the Cathedral Bookstore*

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- In East Africa, the story is told of a woman who carried her Bible everywhere she went. Her neighbors laughed at her, saying, "why the Bible? There are so many other books you could read." She replied, "Yes, there are many books I could read. But there is only one book that reads me." (Hans-Ruedi Weber). How does the Bible "read you"?
- The Church teaches that "Christ himself speaks when the scriptures are proclaimed" in the liturgy. How does Christ speak to you in this Sunday's scriptures? Think of a time when Christ spoke to you powerfully in the readings at Mass.
- What are some qualities that make someone a good listener? Am I a good listener, when it comes to the scriptures proclaimed in Church?
- The ambo at St. James Cathedral is carved with imagery of clouds and rain, trees and leaves. What does this have to do with the proclamation of the word of God? To answer that question, the ambo also has an inscription: Isaiah 55: 10-11. Look up this passage. What does our ambo teach us about God's word?