

We continue Stewardship Month here at St. Mark the Evangelist, and our preaching on the Mass itself, that through a deeper understanding we might live the Mass Monday through Saturday. Living the Mass daily, not just on Sundays, is an act of faith and stewardship.

Moving from the Introductory Rites we spoke of last week, we come to the Liturgy of the Word. Most of the Liturgy of the Word is made up of readings from Scripture, but it also includes the Homily, the Creed and the Prayers of the Faithful. Remember, 'liturgy' means the 'work of the people.' That means active listening and participation. On Sundays and holy days, there are three readings from Scripture along with a Psalm. During most of the year, the first reading is from the Old Testament and the second reading is from one of the New Testament letters. During Easter Time, the first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles which tells the story of the Church in its earliest days. The last reading is always taken from one of the four Gospels.

In the Liturgy of the Word, the Church feeds the people of God from the table of His Word. The Scriptures are the word of God, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In the Scriptures, God speaks to us, leading us along the path to salvation. The Church reminds us that Sacred Scripture, the Bible, is the truth for our salvation. In the first two readings, today we hear clear teaching: Ezekiel says "If I tell the wicked, "O wicked one, you shall surely die," and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, the wicked shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death" ... a clear call to be responsible for others in this world. And Paul in his letter to the Romans we hear: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ... a call to even deeper responsibility for others.

The Responsorial Psalm is sung between the first two readings. The psalm helps us to meditate on the word of God, from the songs and poetry of the Jewish people. "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts" ... and indeed we hear God's voice speaking to us through the Scripture we have just heard.

The high point of the Liturgy of the Word is the reading of the Gospel. Because the Gospels tell of the life, ministry, and preaching of Jesus Christ, it receives several special signs of honor and reverence. The gathered assembly stands to hear the Gospel and it is introduced by an acclamation of praise. Apart from Lent, that acclamation is "Alleluia," derived from a Hebrew phrase meaning "Praise the Lord!" A deacon (or, if no deacon is present, a priest) proclaims the Gospel. And we are reminded of the presence of Christ here ... "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This is most true as we gather for the Mass!

After the Scripture readings, there is a sermon or homily. In the homily, the preacher focuses on the Scripture texts or some other aspect of that day's liturgy, drawing from them lessons that may help us to live better lives, be more faithful to Christ's call to grow in holiness.

At weekend Masses, the Profession of Faith then follows the homily, either the Nicene or Apostles' Creed, or a Baptismal Profession of Faith. The **Nicene Creed** is a statement of faith that developed from the fourth to the eighth century, while the **Apostles' Creed** is the ancient baptismal creed of the Church in Rome. If baptismal promises are renewed, this takes the place of the Creed.

The Liturgy of the Word concludes with the Universal Prayers, also called the Prayers of the Faithful. The gathered assembly intercedes with God on behalf of the Church, the world, and themselves, entrusting their needs to the faithful and loving God.

What, then, must we do to properly receive the Word of God proclaimed at Mass? The Church teaches us that "the readings from the Word of God are to be listened to reverently by everyone", and it provides that those who read the Scriptures at Mass must be "truly suited to carrying out this function and carefully prepared, so that by their hearing the readings from the sacred texts the faithful may conceive in their hearts a sweet and living affection for Sacred Scripture".

The key word in all of this is *listening*. We are called to listen actively and attentively as the lector, deacon or priest proclaims God's Word. Unless one has difficulty hearing, one should not be reading along with a text from a missalette. Rather we should *listen* as we would if Christ himself were standing at the pulpit, 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 lector.

The Word of God, then calls for active 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.