

Week 4: Liturgy of the Word/Readings & Psalm

1st reading

The two main parts of the Mass – Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist – can be seen as ‘two tables’, by which we are nourished “through the hearing of God’s word to us and through the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist” [St. Pope John Paul II]. As Catholics, we believe that the Bible is the word of God, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. On Sundays and special feast days, there are three Scripture readings, with the first reading from the Old Testament, except during the Easter season when it is taken from the Acts of the Apostles.

Inclusion of Scripture readings in our worship is a continuation of ancient tradition, both among the Jewish people and the early Church. Jesus taught in the synagogues, including reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah [Luke 4:17]. The US Catholic Bishops advise us that “readings from the Old Testament tell us of God’s promises and his preparation of his people for the coming of his Son.”

The reading is proclaimed from the **ambo**, at which time the people in the assembly sit. The reader (lector) is a member of the laity. At the end of both readings, the lector will say “The Word of the Lord”, and our response is “Thanks Be to God”.

Did you know? The current three-year **lectionary** cycle of Sunday readings was developed following Vatican II.

A helpful practice: Our focus should be on **listening** to what is being read – unless one is unable to hear – rather than on reading along from a missal text. One should review the scheduled readings prior to Mass so that your full attention can be on **hearing** the word of God.

-Ken Damlo, Liturgy Commission Member

Responsorial Psalm

The Responsorial Psalm is very important to the Liturgy of the Word and is meant to foster meditation on the Word of God. It serves as a thematic bridge between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel. While the psalm can be sung or spoken, church documents state that it is preferable for it to be sung. St. Augustine wrote that the person who sings prays twice, suggesting that music elevates our prayer and helps us to focus the heart and mind on God.

Historically, music in worship was introduced during King David's time, with the Psalms serving as the hymnbook for ancient Jewish liturgy. By Jesus’ time, Psalms were sung in the Temple and during Passover, a practice reflected in the Last Supper. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus and the

disciples sang a hymn before going out to the Mount of Olives. (Matthew 23:26-30). Scholars believe that this is actually a reference to a series of Psalms sung over the Passover meal.

St. Ambrose popularized chanting Psalms in the Western Church, a practice supported by St. Augustine. Later, during the Middle Ages, the Responsorial Psalm evolved into the Gradual, before its restoration post-Vatican II.

Did you know? Singing the Responsorial Psalm invites active listening, reflection, and heartfelt participation, whether sung or spoken, to deepen devotion and worship of God.

A helpful practice: When listening to the Responsorial Psalm, pause and imagine what it would be like to hear Jesus chant the Psalms, and then to sing with him as the Apostles would have done in the Upper Room.

-Doreen Bondy, Associate Music Director/Liturgy Commission Member

2nd reading

The second reading, following the Psalm and preceding the Gospel, is usually one of the letters of St. Paul or other apostolic letters. The purpose of these letters and writings from the early days of the church are to provide moral and spiritual teachings on how to live the Gospel as a Christian. They were written to give encouragement, guidance, correction and support to early Christians.

The readings follow a three-year cycle, and each cycle begins with First Corinthians. The readings follow an independent track and are usually not themed with the other readings. The second reading is often omitted at daily Mass.

James and the letters from Paul are used throughout the year. The letters of Peter and John are included during the Easter and Christmas seasons.

Did you know? Paul's letters were included in the early liturgies of the church. The intent of the letters was to be read to the liturgical assembly and shared with other churches while Paul traveled or was in prison. (Colossians 4:16-18)

A helpful practice: When listening to the second reading, imagine that you are a member of the early church hearing the apostle's letter for the first time. What was the intent, and how are the words relevant to you and to today's church?

-Jon Eveslage, Liturgy Commission Member