

A SUGGESTION FOR THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

P.J. Cullinane

We have come a long way since the liturgy of the word was that part of the Mass we could miss and still fulfil our Sunday obligation! It was the next part of the Mass that mattered because the presence of Christ in the Sacrament was so special.

But nearly 60 years after the Second Vatican Council, have we fully taken on board its teaching that “when the scriptures are proclaimed in the assembly, it is Christ who is speaking to his people” (SC.7) Would I be looking around for a seat during the readings if I really believed Christ was speaking to me? Wouldn't that stop me in my tracks?

Take heart: the difficulty is partly due to the way the scriptures are presented to us in the Mass – as a set of “readings”. They can seem unfamiliar, and not ‘us’. Even the Gospel comes across as another “reading”, about what happened a long time ago. Presented as ‘readings’, the scriptures cannot have the impact on us they are intended to have. People, often parents, tell us that the liturgy of the word isn't “connecting”. But we just carry on. Is there a case for doing things differently?

The first need is for on-going formation concerning how the scriptures speak to us. They invite us to see how God has been present in other people's lives – in their joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments. And because God's ways are not our ways, we learn to expect the unexpected – God turning ordinary human history into salvation history. Having learned how to notice God's presence in other people's lives, we find it easier to notice how the same God is present in our own lives – salvation history continued. When we see that, we live with a hope that is greater than every set-back.

Noticing how God is present, and making connections, is the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearers of God's word. But the Spirit is also working through the readers. Readers are not reading a mere record of things said and done in the past, but are fronting a live presentation. We need to transition from the idea of ‘reading’ to the idea of ‘speaking’ – “Christ is speaking to his people”. So, it is for the readers to bring the scriptures to life by the way they read - engaging those present and drawing them into the scenes depicted in the readings. It requires of readers a sense of the wonder and the drama of God among us.

However, even the readers' best efforts do not easily engage a congregation. Something else needs to happen for the hearers. There is too big a gap between how the liturgy is meant to function and where many in the congregation are ‘at’. The need to bridge that gap justifies other ways of drawing people into the scriptures; more personalised ways of learning how to ‘notice’ God's presence in the scriptures and in their own lives. There is a way this could be done, even if only on an interim basis – until people are more practised in knowing what to look for.

So, first a word of assurance to any who might be concerned about seeming departures from the rubrics. Moral theology and personal moral development come into this. Changes that deflect from the meaning of a given part of the Mass are not acceptable. But adaptations that better bring out its meaning actually help to fulfil the purpose intended by the rubrics.

At the early stages of our moral development, we depend mainly on the letter of the law because we have not yet grasped its underlying purpose. We gradually grow to understand what the law is intended to achieve. Whether by following the rubric, or by appropriate adaptation, we fulfil the law by fulfilling its purpose. We fail to fulfil the law if we obscure or hinder its purpose, even if this is done by rigidly putting the letter of the law above its purpose, its intent, its “spirit”.

As for due reverence, there are, of course, different kinds of reverence: eg the reverence proper at a grave-side; the reverence proper to adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, etc. The kind of reverence proper to liturgy is that which deepens the more we become alive to Christ's real presence – in the congregation (“where two or three are gathered...”); in the word (where “Christ is speaking to his people” - present tense); in the ministry of those ordained to act in the name of Christ; and especially in the Sacrament (Second Vatican Council, SC. 7). These different manifestations of Christ's real presence invite different ways of responding. The appropriate way of responding is the appropriate way of being reverent.

With these assurances, we can now turn to how we might enable the liturgy of the word to more effectively achieve its purpose.

We encounter Christ in both word and sacrament. There is a paradigm for this in St Luke's Easter story about the two disciples “on the road” who were “talking about all that had happened” and were down-hearted, (Lk 24:13-35). Then Jesus “drew near” – his presence was real, but seeing him was different now: “something prevented them from recognizing him”. Then “He explained the meaning of the scriptures to them.” Later, they would say “were not our hearts burning within us as He talked to us on the road”. But that was after their encounter had deepened: “their eyes were opened and they recognised him.... in the breaking of the bread”. St Luke is telling us that, through word and sacrament, they discovered He was alive and present to them. That is the discovery his disciples today need to make.

Our celebrations of Eucharist bring together word and sacrament: “... as once for his disciples, so now for us, He opens the scriptures and breaks the bread” (Eucharistic Prayer, Various Needs, 4). So how can we make our liturgy of the word more like the discussion on the road in which He drew near and explained, and they knew He was there with them? Somehow, the bigger the congregation the less it feels like that! How can we make our celebrations of Eucharist more like the experience on the road to Emmaus?

In a post-covid world/Church - and with much-needed liturgy formation – we could slightly re-format the liturgy of the word. After a short penitential rite and opening prayer to give unity to the gathering, the congregation could turn - with minimal noise and movement – to those around them, (preferably on chairs facing in towards each other) where the scriptures for the day would be quietly and carefully read, prayerfully listened to, reflected on, and applied to our present lives. After approx. 20 minutes, the small groups would form one group again for the “breaking of the bread”, starting with the Creed. (The rubrics allow omission of the homily for a sufficiently good reason; the need being addressed here give us that reason. We still have readers: on these occasions the readers are many.)

Although this formatting of Sunday Mass is a very minor “change”, some Catholics might find it too unfamiliar. It need not be done at every Mass, or It could be done on alternate Sundays. Importantly, this is *not* “discussion groups”. It is the congregation actively tuning in to the scriptures: after the scripture is read, each individual has the opportunity to name a phrase or sentence that “spoke” to them. Further comments would be limited to what can be said in less than one minute so that everyone would spend six to ten times more listening than speaking. And when speaking, it is to name how we feel encouraged, or challenged, by the scriptures we have just now heard. Through our personal witness, the word is being echoed. Pauses for silence are OK! Initial awkwardness would gradually give way to ease.

Many parishes have parishioners who have skills in adult learning processes, group facilitation etc, who could further advise on how to prepare parishioners for this form of breaking open the word.

Even shy parishioners could be encouraged by realising that this way of opening the scriptures makes it easier to relate them to each one's life than can be managed from the lectern. It is a way of *actively tuning in* that accords with the purpose of the "readings".

The on-going discovery of how Christ is present in our lives doesn't stop with ourselves: "On their arrival (in Antioch), Paul and Barnabas assembled the church and gave an account of all that God had done with them..." (Acts 14:27). What Paul and Barnabas did in their assemblies is what we would be doing in ours. Sharing how we have known God's presence in our own lives deepens our relationship with one another (builds up the body of Christ); and develops our ability to speak with other people about how to work for a better world (mission).

My hunch is that those Catholics who find Sunday Mass "boring" would be less likely to do so if they discovered Christ the way the disciples on the road to Emmaus discovered him. Meeting Christ is the experience that changes everything, and without which nothing changes! If we can 'do' the liturgy of the word better, have we any right not to?

There is an element of inconvenience involved in this suggestion. So, it is also my hunch that this proposal will be popular with those who want to get more from the liturgy of the word; and unpopular with those who want to get the Mass over. (To the credit of both, they are *present*; by definition, liturgy involves community and our own real presence. Virtual presence can help our private devotion, but does not substitute for liturgy.)

In the meantime, it would also help if readers honoured the difference between reading and proclaiming. The previous English translation taught them to say "This is the word of the Lord" (which could mean, a record of what He has said - past tense). The current translation requires them, after pausing long enough to get attention, to say: "The word of the Lord!" (i. e. hark! The Lord is saying this to us – present tense).