

Beyond the Beginnings: The Liturgy of the Word

Having completed the *Introductory Rites* of the Mass, we now come to the first of the two main parts of the Mass, the *Liturgy of the Word*. {The other *main* part is the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*, followed by the *Communion Rite* and *Concluding Rite*. But more on those later.} On Sundays and major feast days, the *Liturgy of the Word* consists of three readings from the Bible, one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament letters or the Acts of the Apostles, one from the gospels, and the responsorial psalm. {On week days, there are two readings, and the Psalm.} All the scripture readings used at Mass are found in and proclaimed from the liturgical book called the *Lectioary*. The first of the three Sunday readings to be chosen for a given Sunday is the Gospel, which determines the “theme” for that Sunday. During the special liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter the gospel selections express the themes of the season. But during the rest of the year, the gospel selections are taken from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and certain parts of the Gospel of John. The next of the three Sunday readings to be chosen is the Old Testament reading, the first we actually hear at Mass. This reading is selected to echo or reflect the main theme of the gospel for the day, so the readings come from many different books of the Old Testament. The responsorial psalm is chosen next, and it is intended to echo or reflect directly the Old Testament reading just proclaimed, and so also the gospel theme indirectly. Next the second reading is chosen, though without any direct connection with the theme of the gospel or first reading of the day. Rather, the second readings are taken from the New Testament letters, with sequential arts of one or another of those letters read over the course of several Sundays. With the Sunday readings pulled and put together in this fashion, reading the Sunday readings before actually hearing them proclaimed at Mass help a great deal in understanding what they are saying and why, which isn’t always (or often!) easy to understand at first hearing.

Please let us know what else about our faith tradition you'd like to find out more about.

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