

LITURGY OF THE WORD – Larry Murphy, April 24, 2005

From the First Reading, through the Prayers of the Faithful, we are engaged in the Liturgy of the Word. Most of our “doing” at this part of the Mass is listening, but not passive listening, *active* listening.

On Sundays, we usually have a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, a Psalm, a New Testament reading, and one from the Gospel. The Lectionary, the Book, is now on a three year Sunday cycle. The scripture selections follow the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmastime, Lent, and Easter time. During the rest of the year, we generally read straight through the gospels and the letters, picking up each week where we left off.

The word of God is not a history lesson, though there is history in it. It is not a story, though it is full of stories. It is not a set of rules to live by, though it contains beautiful guidelines for our lives. The word of God is a living and dynamic presence, achieving the salvation it describes, even as the reader proclaims it. The Church teaches: “Christ is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in church”; and again, “In the liturgy, God speaks to his people, Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel.”¹ Through these stories, visions, poems, letters, we find again and again the true meaning of our own journey, our pilgrimage, to the Lord who is our way and truth and life.

So our listening, then, is not like listening to a lecture or play. It is listening with the whole self, mind and heart and soul. We do not expect to be entertained or to learn new facts, but to receive the powerful, proclaimed word of God which can change our lives.

Aelred Rosser, a Scripture scholar and author tells us that: “words are not always just sounds or written symbols that *refer* to something, as in ‘There is the house where I live.’ In some usage, words actually *do* something. For example, the words ‘I baptize you’ or ‘I forgive you’ or, at the Eucharist, ‘this is my body’ do not simply refer to an action; they actually accomplish the action.”² In this context, the proclamation, the words themselves, and our listening are all active, not passive.

So then, what helps us actively listen? Several things.

First: Lectors, deacons, and priests must read as the storytellers of the community. Lectors should live and pray with their scripture reading, practicing it, making it their own.

Second: Unless one has difficulty hearing, we should give full attention to the reader and not follow along in a missalette. The Word of God is meant to be communicated to us through proclamation and active listening; by reading along, the bond of communication is broken.

Third: We who listen to the scriptures on Sunday should prepare by reading these scriptures at home during the week. Next week’s scriptures are listed in the bulletin.

Finally: the readings are to be surrounded with reverence, with honor. We should be reminded that Jesus Christ is ‘the word made flesh’; that he is the ‘word incarnate’. The familiar statement: “The Word of the Lord,” and response, “Thanks be to God,” can have a wonderful influence on us over time, creating in our hearts and minds the real association between the active words of the reading, the benevolent acts of the God who revealed them,³ and the actions we take in our lives.

¹ Workbook for Lectors and Gospel Readers 2004, United States Edition, Aelred R. Rosser, Liturgy Training Publications, © 2003 Archdiocese of Chicago, p. iv.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*