

The Intimate Connection between Word and Rite in the Liturgy

Bruce T. Morrill, SJ

Among the most crucial principles the Second Vatican Council established for the reform of the Church's liturgy was the fundamental, one could even say authoritative, role of sacred scripture in the content and structure of the rites. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* teaches:

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from Scripture that the readings are given and explained in the homily and that psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration; it is from the Scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the reform, progress, and adaptation of the liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for Scripture to which the venerable tradition of both Eastern and Western rites gives testimony (#24).

Taking this statement as programmatic for exploring the integral relationship between word and sacrament in the life of the Church, I shall begin with the nature of biblical proclamation in the liturgy. On that basis we can consider how scripture inspires the content of the liturgy's texts and the meaning of its symbolic actions, before concluding with a note on sound Tradition.

THE LAVISH TABLE OF THE WORD

If asked, most people would probably mention the use of the local language (in the words of the Constitution, "the mother tongue") as the most obvious difference between the post-Vatican II liturgy and the previous post-Tridentine rites. While on the surface this switch to the vernacular made elements of the ritual more comprehensible to the people, among the reasons given for that change, first and foremost, is the content of the readings to be proclaimed in not only the Mass but also the administration of every sacrament (see SCL, 36.2). The pastoral and theological impact of the council's mandate that the "treasures of the Bible . . . be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word [*mensa verbi Dei*]" (CSL, 51) has given rise to a profound



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transformation in the content, tenor, and length of our sacramental celebrations, especially the Mass.

For centuries prior to the council, the Church practiced a one-year cycle of epistle and Gospel passages in the Mass, with minimal, if any preaching, and no Prayers of the Faithful. Indeed, the Mass's opening with the priest's prayers at the foot of the altar followed by the Kyrie and Gloria was, in terms of duration and drama, more significant than the usually cursory reading of two biblical texts with the gradual in between.

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In the Liturgy of the Word, the assembly responds to the personal offer of grace that Jesus gives.

Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body" (#21). The word of God is venerated by the liturgical ministers' effectively proclaiming the readings, chanting the psalm, and preaching the Gospel, along with the people's fervent desire to make the Gospel's mission their own for the life of the world. Thus, the intentions of the Prayer of the Faithful are not to be announced by the presiding priest but rather by a "cantor, lector, or another person" (GIRM, 138), who leads the faithful in their response to the word.

The Christian dynamic of revelation comes full circle as the faithful raise up in prayer a Church and world ever in need of God's grace. For believers engaged in the Liturgy of the Word, the wealth of Old and New Testament literature, especially the Gospel accounts of Jesus' words and actions, contribute to an image of the Christ who becomes present in the sacramental ritual. When done with even a modicum of care (i.e., well-paced reading, pastoral preaching, opportunity for silent reflection), the proclamation of the word prevents sacramental celebration from devolving into mere ritualism. In the Mass, the dialogue of divine proclamation and human response shapes the thoughts and emotions of the faithful as they turn to the table of Christ's body, well disposed to respond not mechanically but actively to the Preface's call, "Lift up your hearts."

SACRAMENTAL GRACE: ENCOUNTERING CHRIST'S PRESENCE

While the faithful may well draw consolation from the doctrine that sacramental grace is assured in the validly performed rites of the Church, the tradition has much more to offer than just a conceptually held belief. The recovered and enhanced tradition of the proclaimed word in all of the Church's rites offers an encounter with the person of Jesus the Christ, who comes to confront and console with his revelation of who God is, what God has done, what God desires, and how we are invited into God's reign. This amounts to a deepened experience and understanding of grace.

What distinguishes sacred scripture as proclaimed word in liturgy from all other ways whereby believers might engage biblical texts is the Church's belief that Christ is truly speaking in the present moment amidst his assembled body: "[Christ] is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church" (CSL, 7). In liturgy, the scriptural passages are not merely read, studied, or personally reflected upon but, rather, the Word comes alive amidst a people, making present a living encounter with the Lord Jesus. Christ is present in the liturgy, through the power of the Holy Spirit, because of the Paschal Mystery that every celebration of the rites enacts, affording all the opportunity to recognize that mystery as "present and active within us" (CSL, 35.2).

In the Liturgy of the Word, the members of the assembly are not left to speculate, "What would Jesus do?" On the contrary, they respond to the personal offer of grace the living Jesus gives in this particular event, an original moment when once again the Lord says: "Today this word has been fulfilled in your hearing" (see Lectionary of the Mass: Introduction, 3; c.f. Luke 4:21). The assembled faithful do not hear about God; rather, they hear God speak to them. God does not communicate by mental or spiritual telepathy but through the activity of the liturgical assembly and its ministers, whose faithful pastoral practices of the rites serve the reception and appropriation of the word in thoughts, experiences, and emotions.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE PASCHAL MYSTERY IN OUR LIVES

As the General Introduction to the *Order of Christian Funerals* tells of the importance of scripture in funeral rites, it exemplifies the treasure of the word of God is for us:

In every celebration for the dead, the Church attaches great importance to the reading of the word of God. The readings proclaim to the assembly the paschal mystery, teach remembrance of the dead, convey the hope of being gathered together again in God's kingdom, and encourage the witness of Christian life. Above all, the readings tell of God's designs for a world in which suffering and death will relinquish their hold on all whom God has called his own. A careful selection and use of readings from scripture for the funeral rites will provide the family and the community with an

opportunity to hear God speak to them in their needs, sorrows, fears, and hopes (OCF, 22).

While the priority given to the Paschal Mystery in the present example might seem due to the pastoral circumstances of the funeral rites, that priority is essential to all liturgical celebrations. It is only because God has raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and continuously sends his Spirit into the midst of those assembled in his name that the celebrating community enters into the very world of Jesus, sharing in the company of his kingdom “God’s designs for a world in which suffering and death will relinquish their hold” That this is not merely wishful thinking is assured by the biblical witness, especially the Gospel narratives, wherein the humanity of the risen Jesus comes alive in the stories of his encounters with the women and men among whom he taught and healed, proclaiming the in-breaking of God’s reign.

In addition to the proclamation of the word in the liturgy (including the readings, psalmody, and homily), biblical words and imagery suffuse the content of the rites of the post-conciliar Church: “It is from Scripture that the readings are given and explained in the homily and that psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration; it is from the Scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning” (CSL, 24). Indeed, the reformed rites of the Church find their *pastoral* promise fundamentally in the biblical witness of the person and mission of Jesus. For example, the General Introduction of the *Pastoral Care of the Sick* opens with a blunt acknowledgment of the troubling questions suffering and illness pose to the human condition, only to assert that “Christ’s words” reveal “meaning and value” in people’s struggles with illness both “for their own salvation and for the salvation of the world” (1). This stunning assertion about individual and universal salvation coincides with believers’ personal knowledge of Christ’s love for them in their illness, a conviction grounded in the fact that Jesus “during his lifetime often visited and healed the sick.” Even as Christians find the promise of the world’s salvation in the Resurrection of the crucified Christ, this faith does not abstract him into the realm of philosophical principle or mythical deity. The gift of genuine faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, entails a yearning to know Jesus of Nazareth that is as ancient as the communities from which the canonical Gospel accounts emerged.

A crucial distinction between the Gospel accounts the early Church discerned to be God’s word and the various Gnostic texts that vied with them for the claim to revelation was the latter’s general disregard for the stories of Jesus’ life and work among his fellow Palestinian Jewish people. To give revelatory status to those stories is to embrace the mysterious ambiguity of our created bodily condition as the very medium of our divine redemption. Thus, Gnostic gospels largely include sayings by Jesus but little, if any, narrative of his actions—his miraculous work with the physically and spiritually afflicted, his table fellowship with sinners, his emotional investment in the lives of the poor. The reconstituting of group membership, the forging



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Throughout the prayers of the Mass, scripture permeates the liturgy.

of new communal bonds, points to the other crucial feature of Jesus’ prophetic mission that the first generation of believers in him as risen Lord understood to be essential to following him: his open table fellowship.

Jesus called those he healed to communion in the reign of God, and thereby to a sharing in his healing life. Feasting was a sign of healing and forgiveness, as Mark’s account of the call of Levi the tax collector exemplifies (2:13–17). There is near unanimous scholarly agreement that Jesus’ egalitarian dining with sinners was one of the most prominent, highly symbolic, and ultimately dangerous features of his prophetic mission. True to classical Jewish prophetic tradition, N. T. Wright has argued, Jesus’ open fellowship with the poor, the sinners, the nobodies was a highly symbolic enactment of his claim that God was taking a new initiative to deliver his exiled people, inaugurating a new interpretation of Torah for the life of the people. Both the healings and the table fellowship were shocking acts challenging social conventions and the regnant organs of power, both religious and political, countering their claims to divine authority with an enacted proclamation of mercy and forgiveness as the hallmark of God’s sovereign rule. As essential elements of the Gospel narratives, miracles and meals together comprise a bravely enacted vision that proves to be a matter of life or death for Jesus. For believers from the first generations to the present they are an invitation to life “in the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead” (Romans 8:11). It is the revelation of this Jesus as Christ that makes scripture the inspiring, empowering source of meaning in the liturgy’s symbolic words and actions.

SOUND TRADITION STANDING ON SACRED SCRIPTURE

The language of mercy and healing pervades the collects of the Mass (the Opening Prayer and Prayer after Communion) throughout the seasons of the liturgical year. At the climax of the Introductory Rites the presiding celebrant's invitation to prayer and the ensuing collect constantly acknowledge God's mercy and ask for the Spirit to empower us for peaceful solidarity in faith, hope, and love. A representative sampling of post-communion prayers in Ordinary Time reveals such petitions as, "Lord, / may your healing love / turn us from sin / and keep us on the way that leads to you" (Tenth Sunday), and "Lord, / may this eucharist increase within us / the healing power of your love" (Twenty-first Sunday). In light of scripture, this should come as no surprise, nor should contemporary believers bemoan the content of such prayers unless, of course, in hearing them they are imagining a different god than the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Liturgical prayer for mercy, forgiveness, and healing is not a matter of repeated groveling before a god who arbitrarily wields autonomous tyrannical authority or only feels powerful by demanding the abeyance of inferiors. On the contrary, the assembled Church's prayers are life-empowering acts incarnating the faith of the centurion who, in response to Jesus' offer to come and cure his servant, replied: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed" (Matthew 8:8). That very biblical passage is the source for the assembly's response to the invitation in the Communion Rite. Indeed, in the Latin typical edition of the Mass of Paul VI the faithful are to respond: *Dominus, non sum dignus, ut intres sub tectum meum, sed tantum dic verbo et sanabitur anima mea*. An accurate English translation would read, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but say only the word and my soul shall be healed." Unfortunately, the current Missal has the people say, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." The translation, thereby, reduces the faithful's personal appropriation of the word of God at the moment of Holy Communion to a mere, if not lost, allusion to that powerful passage of the Gospel.

Advocates for the biblically toned-down translation of the official Latin text of the current Communion Rite argue that some contemporary Catholics are so ignorant of scripture that they largely would find the more accurate translation, "that you should come under my roof," arcane and off-putting. To my mind, that is a distressing admission to how terribly short we continue to fall of the council Fathers' vision that scripture imbue the liturgy and, thus, the lives of the faithful. Indeed, I would press further that the invitation to Communion, likewise, adhere more closely to the Latin typical edition so as to read, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, happy those who are called to the wedding banquet of the Lamb (*ad cenam Agni*)."

The first half of the invitation quotes John the Baptist at the beginning of the Gospel of John (1:29), while the second echoes the Book of Revelation, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb"

(19:9). The wedding banquet imagery, of course, draws even more broadly and deeply from the parables of Jesus in the synoptic accounts of the Gospel, a fact that altogether attests to the historical importance of wedding, banquet, and supper in Jesus' description of the kingdom of God. By more explicitly articulating the biblical content repeatedly over time, the invitation to Communion would afford the opportunity for the faithful to hear the Spirit's prompting of connections between their lives and the life God is offering through the indwelling of Jesus among us.

The soundness of liturgical tradition, then, stands on the shoulders of scripture. The execution of a three-year Sunday Lectionary cycle, as well as a two-year cycle of readings for daily Mass, has realized the council Fathers' mandate, "In sacred celebrations there is to be more reading from holy Scripture and it is to be more varied and apposite" (SCL, 35.1). Consistent, widespread, quality liturgical preaching knowledgeable of this treasury is yet to be realized. For example, during Year C of the Easter Season six Sundays of second readings from the Book of Revelation afford homilists a tri-annual occasion to link the vision of salvation (the Lamb's wedding banquet) with its present offer at the Table of the Lord's Body. That preaching improves to be more "the proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever present and active within us" (#35.2) promises a more intimate connection of word and sacrament for the nourishment of the people of God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can you recall any times at liturgy when you heard a certain passage or even sentence being proclaimed that struck you so powerfully that you had the sense that God was speaking to you in those words? How did that affect your experience of the liturgy but also perhaps your life?
2. Name and consider the different ways you engage or encounter scripture in your life (for example, personal reading, Bible study group, hearing it proclaimed in liturgy, and so on). What comparisons and contrasts do you note in these different modes of engaging the word of God? Do you find them complementing each other, and if so, in what ways?
3. What do you listen for in a homily? Can you recall a particular homily or preacher you found enriched your participation in liturgy, and if so, how? ♦

BRUCE MORRILL, SJ, is associate professor and graduate program director in the Theology Department at Boston College. He co-edited *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God* © 2008 The Liturgical Press and is the author of *Divine Worship, and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life*, to be released in December 2009 as a Pueblo book.