

From the Pastor – 110313 – The Mass – Readings

Dear Friends,

Question: In the Mass, we have three readings from the Bible. You've said that this is called the Liturgy of the Word, but I don't understand the structure of this big part of the Mass. Please explain it.

Response: This is the focus of today's column – my November column on the Mass.

The most obvious thing to say first is that, yes, all of the readings are from the Bible. We usually call this Sacred Scripture, which literally means “holy writings.” We believe that these readings are the Word of God – God speaking to us. The word “Liturgy” means worship and so we first worship God by hearing God's Word proclaimed or read aloud.

For Sundays, the readings are arranged in three one-year cycles – named, creatively, Cycles A, B, and C. Cycle A is read during one liturgical year, then Cycle B during the following year, Cycle C during the next year, and then the whole cyclical process repeats itself. By the way, the liturgical year begins on the First Sunday of Advent which is at the end of November or beginning of December. The effect is that over a three-year span we hear a great deal of the Bible proclaimed at Mass. One author calculates that we hear 14% of the Old Testament and 71% of the New Testament during these three cycles of readings.

The Church has an approved book, called the Lectionary, which contains the readings that are to be proclaimed at Mass. The selection of readings was approved by Pope Paul VI and is the same for the entire universal Church.

The gospel is the focus and climax of the Liturgy of the Word. The gospels were selected first and to some extent, the other readings were selected to complement them. So, the Gospel of Saint Matthew is read on most Sundays of Year A, Saint Mark in Year B, and Saint Luke in Year C. In the liturgical year that is now drawing to a close we have been reading from Luke, Year C. This fall, Advent begins on Sunday, December 1. We will begin the Gospel of Matthew then – Cycle A of the readings. On some Sundays in each of the liturgical years, passages from the fourth gospel, the Gospel of John are read. This especially happens during the Lenten and Easter Seasons. In this way, the Liturgy of the Word over the three-year cycle exposes us to all four gospels.

On most Sundays, the first reading is from the Old Testament. The particular text for a Sunday is selected because it is seen as being a prelude to or foreshadowing of what the gospel proclaims. The responsorial psalm which follows this reading is from one of the psalms of the Old Testament. Whether it is sung (as we always do on Sundays) or recited, it is intended to be a prayerful reflection on the first reading. Thus, there is usually a thematic unity of the gospel, the Old Testament reading and the responsorial psalm. The second readings are taken from one of the New Testament letters and usually are not connected in theme with the other readings. They are selected to enrich us with a fuller awareness of the Word of God.

Now there is one notable exception to the usual pattern on the selection of the readings. During the Easter Season, the first reading is from a book of the Bible called “The Acts of the Apostles,” instead of the Old Testament. The Acts shows how the risen Christ worked in the early Church and it helps to emphasize that the death and resurrection of Christ has brought the old law or Old Testament to fulfillment.

My next column on the Mass will be in early December. By the way, the past columns on the Mass (June 2, July 7, August 4, September 1, and October 20) can be found on the parish website at www.stmargaret.org and click on the Information tab - Bulletins. Blessings to all of you!

Father Mike