

# Believe Celebrate Live THE EUCHARIST

## The Liturgy of the Word

### Storytelling

“Storytelling is the single most important energy of all religious celebration,” writes Father Eugene Walsh, ss. “Storytelling lies at the heart of worship” (Walsh, *Proclaiming God’s Love in Word and Deed*, pp. 10–11). On the first Holy Thursday, Jesus gathered in the upper room with his disciples for a specific reason: to celebrate the Passover, to join in the ritual retelling of the story of how the Hebrews became God’s chosen people. Within the context of that story, Jesus began to tell a new story, by taking bread and wine and sharing his very self with his disciples.

Today, it is in the context of Christ’s story that our own stories unfold. As we celebrate the Liturgy of Word, “we don’t leave our lives and our moment in history behind as we listen to these stories from the past; we actually take them up anew in the light of the Word we have heard. The story of our lives is seen to be part of a larger story—the story that the Bible tells” (Driscoll, *What Happens at Mass*, p. 39). In the proclamation of the scriptures at Mass, ancient wisdom and long-ago wonders are made present, and the words of prophets once again await their fulfillment in our own place and time.

### The Table and Altar of the Word

We say “Amen” to the opening prayer of the Mass. All are seated. The lector, and later the psalmist, proceeds to the ambo. We have taken our places around the table and altar of the Word.

The readings we share at this table are not chosen



at random. In fact, they are not “chosen” at all; they are drawn from a book of readings known as the Lectionary. The Lectionary was developed at the direction of the Second Vatican Council, which in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* called for a more plentiful sharing of the scriptures. Arranged in a three-year Sunday cycle and two-year daily cycle, the Lectionary provides three readings and a psalm for each Sunday of the year. In the course of three years we hear almost the entirety of the New Testament, and a good portion of the Old as well.

### Who Wrote the Bible?

At the beginning of each reading, we are given a short introduction that tells us who wrote it: “A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah,” for example. But at the end of the reading, a new attribution is made: This is “the word of the Lord,” not in the past but in the present tense. Is there a contradiction here? Perhaps, but it is a wonderful one, which illuminates our Catholic understanding of the sacred scriptures. For these sacred writers, chosen by God, were not simply saintly secretaries, passively taking dictation from above. According to Vatican II, they “made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though God acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written” (*Constitution on Divine Revelation* #11). They wrote in the language and the forms of their day. They used images and concepts familiar to their audience. That is why it is so important that we understand who wrote the text, in what setting, and to whom.



## Living Words

The scriptures proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word exist, then, on a historical level. But the liturgy is not a history lesson. In the liturgy, what is proclaimed becomes present by the power of the Holy Spirit. “The Word proclaimed in liturgy is not some pale reflection or residue of the event proclaimed there. It is the whole reality to which the words bear testimony made present” (Driscoll, p. 35). These words—written long ago by Isaiah or Jeremiah or Paul or Luke or John—are truly God’s word, spoken to us, here and now. “Jesus has something to say to this assembly today. Jesus is not just delivering a general message for the world at large. . . . Jesus is there precisely to speak to these people in this moment about the needs of the moment” (Walsh, p. 40). God speaks, and the Christian people respond with hearts full of gratitude: “Thanks be to God!”



the proclamation of the Gospel we meet the risen Christ. “Jesus rose from the dead with the whole life he once lived rising with him . . . every word that Jesus spoke, every action he performed, can be present to us because it rose with him” (Driscoll, p. 36).

We also acknowledge Christ’s risen presence in the dialogue we now exchange with the

priest or deacon. Once again, as at the beginning of the Mass, he reminds us that God is with us: “The Lord be with you.” (This dialogue takes place four times during the Mass—always at important moments, to mark the beginning of something new.) This time, when the reading is announced, we respond with an acclamation of praise: “Glory to you, O Lord!” That acclamation is accompanied by the sign of the cross, made in a special way. A cross is drawn on the open pages of the Gospel book, and then the whole assembly marks forehead, lips, and heart with the cross. This gesture is in itself a prayer, as we ask Christ to open our minds to understand, our lips to speak, and our hearts to believe his Gospel. After the Gospel reading, we join in another acclamation: “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ!” We speak directly to Christ, whom we acknowledge as present in the words of his gospel, spoken long ago but renewed this day and fulfilled in our hearing.

## The Gospel

The reading of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. We stand. The priest or deacon holds the Gospel book high in solemn procession to the ambo. During this procession, we sing *Hallel Yah!* “Praise God!” As St. Augustine observed, “Alleluia” is the song proper to an Easter people. We sing alleluia, our resurrection song, because in

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What qualities make someone a good listener? Are you a good listener when it comes to the scriptures proclaimed in church?
- *The Book That Reads Me* by Hans-Ruedi Weber tells the story of a woman who carried her Bible everywhere. Her neighbors laughed, saying, “There are so many other books you could read.” She replied, “Yes, but there is only one book that reads me.” How does the Bible “read” you?
- How did Christ speak to you in this Sunday’s scriptures? When else has Christ spoken to you powerfully in the readings?