

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD
Second Sunday of Lent 2018
St Michael & All Angels, Barnes

WORD in the WORD

The beginning of John's Gospel calls Christ the 'Word of God' – that's with a capital 'W'.

When we talk about the liturgy of the word – meaning the part of the service containing the readings, sermon, creed and intercessions – we are using word with a small 'w'.

But there is an intrinsic relationship between Christ the Word and the word of scripture.

The Word is in the word.

One speaks through the other.

That's why I have given you the image from Binham Abbey in Norfolk.

A medieval painting, overlaid with scripture texts at the Reformation, has, quite by chance, slowly emerged through the peeling paintwork. For me, this captures the Christian understanding of Christ speaking to us through the liturgy of the word – the second part of the four-act drama of the Eucharist, which we focus on today.

LISTENING

The liturgy of the word derives from the Jewish worship of the synagogue, when the community came together to hear the Torah, to sing Psalms, listen to teaching and offer prayers. We see this clearly in Luke's Gospel when Jesus stands up in the synagogue to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and then he comments on the text.

Christians have continued this tradition, and originally, the liturgy of the word was a separate service from the rest of the Eucharist, but they have become two halves of the one service. These are equal in length, but also in significance. So the altar is framed and balanced

by lectern and pulpit. As one theologian put it: *'What is begun in the word is perfected in the sacrament.'*

We gather to listen in a world where it is harder to listen than ever before. We live in a noisy and restless society where our concentration is shot to pieces and doing one thing at a time is considered old-fashioned.

But Christ the Word calls for our attention. St Benedict begins his rule for monks by saying, *'Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart'*. When we listen to scripture, it is different from ordinary listening. We listen in faith, ready to receive what God has to reveal to us, bringing to our attention what we need to hear. It isn't easy to listen, but we wait upon God, we make that offering - a sacrifice of attention.

READINGS

But what are we listening to?

First we hear the Old Testament, because it is the spiritual foundation and background of our faith. Without the Jewish scriptures we cannot make sense of the New Testament, we cannot understand Jesus Christ.

Then we hear the Epistles of the New Testament, the stories of the church in its earliest years. St Paul writing to the Colossians says, *'When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans'*. These letters were intended for circulation in their own day and they continue to inform, instruct and guide us now.

As we know, listening isn't passive. It's active and participatory. We all know when someone isn't listening to us. And so at the end of each reading we respond saying *'Thanks be to God'* to show that we have at least tried to listen.

We say this even if we haven't really *understood* what has been read. Or even when we didn't *like* what was said.

But we still thank God because even if it doesn't mean something to us now, it may mean more to us in the future. It may have meant much to the person sitting next to you – we just can't tell what the effect will be and when it will happen.

GOSPEL

But of course, one reading stands out from the others – the Gospel. We greet this reading with an acclamation, and we stand to welcome it as we would when we meet any important person.

The Gospel is surrounded by acolytes bearing candles because the Psalmist says that God's word is '*a lamp to my feet and a light upon my path*'.

It is processed into the middle of the congregation, just as Jesus entered the world and came among us. So the Gospel is brought from the Altar – the place of God's presence – into the centre of the church, mirroring the reality of the Incarnation as the presence of God in the world. The Gospel book is broken open among us, just as the bread will be broken open on the Altar – and Christ is manifest once more.

And then the Gospel is announced, you will often see people making the sign of the Cross three times at that moment, tracing it with their thumb on the forehead, lips and on the heart. This is a silent prayer: '*May the Lord be in my mind, on my lips and in my heart*'.

Then we hear the Gospel, which means 'good news' – and the question is this – do you receive it as such?

HOMILY

The Gospel leads into the sermon, the homily, the address, whatever you want to call it, it's the same thing.

There are many examples of sermons in the Bible.

St Peter preaches to the crowds on the day of Pentecost.

St Paul preaches to the men of Athens.

Most of all, Our Lord preaches to the people throughout his ministry.

Sermon's receive a bad press as both boring and officious – *'don't preach at me!'* we might say to a bossy person.

In Acts, Paul preaches for so long in Troas, that a young man called Eutychus goes to sleep and falls out of a third floor window.

However, the story has a happy ending when Paul restores him to life – and then he carries on preaching!

In Oscar Wildes' play, 'The importance of being Earnest', the tedious Dr Chasuble has only one sermon!:

'My sermon on the Manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or as in the present case, distress. I have preached it at Harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmation, on days of humiliation and on festal days. The last time I delivered it at the Cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent Among the Upper Classes. The Bishop, who was present, was much struck by some of the analogies I drew.'

But sermons can also transform lives, galvanise communities, inspire action, restore faith. When the Risen Lord *'opened the scriptures'* to the disciples on the road to Emmaus it says that their *'hearts burned within them'*.

Here's a description of Blessed John Henry Newman preaching at the university church in Oxford:

'Newman described closely some of the incidents of our Lord's Passion; he then paused. For a few moments there was a breathless silence. Then, in a low clear voice, of which the faintest vibration was audible in the farthest corner of St Mary's, he said, 'Now I bid you recollect that He to whom these things were done was Almighty God'. It was as if an electric stroke had gone through the church, as if every person understood for the first time the meaning of what he had all his life been saying.'

It has been said that there is no such thing as a bad sermon, but only a bad listener. Well, I'm not sure that's entirely correct! - but there is some truth in it. Like the bible readings, no matter how good or bad a sermon is, there is normally *something* to take from it. Rarely do we remember whole sermons. Like dreams they tend to fade away quickly unless we may a conscious effort to remember them. So here's my recommendation, in the brief silence that follows a sermon, always ask yourself, what is the one thing you want to remember from it in the week ahead?

CREED

After the sermon we say the Creed.

In the Eucharist we say the Nicene Creed, or to give it its proper name, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, that developed out of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in the early 4th century.

Creed means *'belief'*, and statements of faith go as far back as the New Testament itself. The centurion standing at the foot of the Cross confessed a very simple creed when he said of Jesus, *'Truly this man was the Son of God'*.

The Creed we say at Mass derives from the faith expressed by catechumens at their Baptism – so it takes a Trinitarian form, beginning with God the Father, then Jesus the Son, and finally the Holy Spirit, concluding with the church on earth and in heaven.

We say the Creed in our worship, because Christians of every tribe and language, status and class are united by a common expression of faith. We are defined as Christians by our belief.

But the Creed is not a shopping list of faith.
Nor a set of propositions we must sign up to.
It is the articulation of a mystery.

The Creeds try to say enough, but also not too much, because we can never express the mystery of God in mere words.

But we do know that these words are great words, and are trying to express something of the reality of God and of the experience of belief in Jesus Christ in a way that has been tested over time.

Belief in this context is not about personal opinion or intellectual assent, but about a trust in God through the community of Faith. That's why this Creed begins 'We believe' not 'I believe'. The Creed is a communal text and when our faith is weak we can still say it together, because we receive strength from those around us who may feel more confident than we do. We are supported by our fellow Christians and those who have confessed the same faith in the centuries gone by.

INTERCESSION

The liturgy of the word is brought to its end with the intercessions, the prayers of the faithful.

Of course, the whole service is prayer, but what these prayers do is bring to the surface the specific concerns of the people at this particular time and on this particular day.

In the 2nd century, Justin Martyr gives perhaps the earliest description of prayer in the church. He describes what happens immediately after someone has been baptised:

'[we] bring him to the place where those who are called brethren are assembled, in order that we may offer earnest prayers in common for ourselves and for the newly enlightened person, and for all others in every place ... at the end of the prayers we salute one another with a kiss [the peace].'

The intercessions are at this pivotal point in the service, between the liturgy of the word and sacrament, because prayer as the poet George Herbert describes it is *'The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth'*. So having prayed for the church, the world, the community, the sick and the departed we know that the church on earth and the church in heaven are united as one.

It is at this point, mindful of Christ our great high priest who forever intercedes for us before the father, that we dare to approach the throne of grace with boldness, and begin the liturgy of the sacrament, the third act in the drama of the Eucharist, which we will explore next week.