

First Sunday of Lent, Cycle B
Genesis 9:8-15
Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:12-15
Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

The Mass is made up of two parts: The Liturgy of the Word and The Liturgy of the Eucharist. Reverence for the Eucharist is characteristic of Catholicism. Surely, if there is one divine instruction we have managed to obey through all the centuries of the Church's existence, it is Christ's command: "Do this in memory of me." In recent decades, without diminishing in the least the esteem in which we hold the Eucharist, the Church has tried to increase our understanding of, and appreciation for, the other part of the Mass: The Liturgy of the Word.

Now clearly, the Liturgy of the Word must be profoundly important, if it stands along side the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After all, in the Eucharist we have the *real presence* of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Well, the fact is, Christ is present when the *Word* is proclaimed in Christian worship. "The Word," is one of the titles of the Son of God. John's Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And later: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Christ is the Word, and when the Word is proclaimed, Christ is there. That is why the Church has always treated the book of the Scriptures with special reverence, almost as if it were the person of Christ.

In the ancient world, when the emperor processed from one place to another, two candle bearers went before him to light his way. Incense was wafted about to honor the Emperor and protect him from any odors

from the unwashed crowd. When candles and incense are used in the opening procession of the Mass and during the Liturgy of the Word, the Book of the Gospels is literally being treated like a king. The priest or deacon does it homage by kissing it after reading the Gospel. So it is little wonder that the monastic spiritual tradition tells us not to leave our Bible in a row of books on a shelf as if it were no different than the others, and that many Christians carry a small copy of the New Testament next to their hearts.

After the Gospel is read, the priest or deacon *preaches* the Word. Here, again, God is present. Now this is difficult for us to imagine, but in days of yore, the Sunday sermon was often the most entertaining event in a person's week. Two hundred years ago, the great majority of books sold, were books of *sermons*. In some places today the Sunday homily is still a highpoint. Years ago, before I presided at Mass in a rural Ugandan village, the local catechist had special instructions for me. He said, "Father a lot of these people have walked for two hours to get to Mass, and after Mass they face a two hour walk home. If you don't preach for *at least* twenty minutes, they will feel cheated."

I've yet to receive similar instructions here in the States. We have the greatest entertainers and entertainments in the world at our fingertips. It used to be that if people wanted music they had to sing a song. Now they can push a button and let Pavarotti do it. Today we poor preachers are unable to compete with "American Idol" or "The Big Bang Theory" for entertainment value. Someone told me that that the average camera shot in a modern film is just four seconds long. At a Notre Dame Football practice no single drill lasts longer than two minutes, lest the players' attention wander. Internet surfing has impaired our

ability to read even a short piece of journalism from start to finish. My colleague Karen Eifler occasionally reminds me that studies have shown that the “sweet spot” for podcasts like this one is about four minutes. (I’m afraid I’m not going to hit the mark today). This is the cultural reality that your poor parish priest faces when he sets out to talk to you for ten minutes over a temperamental sound system.

If we discover a homilist or a homily that we find fascinating, we should count ourselves blest. If on the other hand we find ourselves bored, we shouldn't "tune out." However flawed the preacher's technique, we believe that Christ is trying to communicate with us as individuals, whenever the Word is preached. We need to listen for what the sermon is saying to *us*.

A great Holy Cross priest, Father Jerry Wilson, used to remark with wonder how often someone would tell him that something he had said in a homily decades before had changed their life. Then they would tell him what he had said, and more often than not, if he remembered the homily, he would realize that what they heard was not at all what he intended to say. Jerry mused, “I suppose I should be discouraged by this, but I’m not. I figure they heard what God wanted them to hear.” What does God want *you* to hear today? The next time your mind starts to wander during a homily, start listening for a phrase or an idea that seems to speak to your heart -- to your own situation. When something strikes you, write it down, and reflect on it from time to time during the week. This practice can spur real spiritual growth, and can help us to better appreciate the Liturgy of the Word. Give it a try. It might be a good resolution for Lent.