

Understanding the Mass: The Second Reading

In his book, “The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Mass,” Lawrence Johnson gives a concise history of the second reading used in the Roman Liturgy. He writes,

*For centuries the Roman Liturgy used the term “Epistle” to designate the reading which preceded the gospel even when this reading was not taken from the New Testament letter. In the east, however, the reading before the gospel was simply called “the Apostle,” a designation suitable for all the books of the New Testament which come down to us from the Church of the apostles.*¹

Johnson adds,

*Today a New Testament text is always given as the second reading on Sundays and Solemnities. Although the choice of the text was made quite independently of the first reading more the Gospel, during certain seasons passages have been selected to correspond with the mystery being celebrated at a particular time of the liturgical year. For example, during the Christmas season there is this successive reading from the First Letter of St. John which recounts the mystery of love made incarnate in Christ.*²

In his book, “A Biblical Walk Through the Mass,” Edward Sri offers a more detailed description of the biblical texts used in the liturgy. He writes,

*The second reading comes from the New Testament: one of the epistles, the Acts of the Apostles, or the Book of Revelation. Though often selected independently of the first reading and the Gospel, these New Testament writings reflect on the mystery of Jesus Christ and his saving work and the meaning it has for our lives. They also draw out the practical applications of our life in Christ and exhort us ever more to “put on Christ” and turn away from sin.*³

In his book, “What Happens at Mass,” Fr. Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., reminds us, that, “much of what has been said about the reading of the word of God from the Old

¹ The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Mass, Johnson, FDLC 2011 Pg. 37

² Ibid Pg. 37

³ A Biblical walk through the Mass, Edward Sri, Ascension 2011, Pg. 64

Testament can be applied to the second reading, always taken from one of the letters of the apostles.” Moreover, Fr. Driscoll emphasizes that “the Apostolic Letters lead us clearly toward” the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, which is the center of our faith.⁴

For example, “If we look at the content of the preaching of the primitive Church as represented by someone like St. Paul, we can see the situation that did not feel the need of the Gospel genre. Paul preached only the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, and he managed to preach the Gospel without reference to the many miracles of Jesus, not to words, parables, mention the details of his birth.”⁵



Hence, the second reading mostly fits the genre of a letter written to a person or church community.

At this point, it may help to us to understand more about the some of the genres that we do experience in the readings so we may get more fruit out of the readings. In his course book, “Introduction to the New Testament,” Fr. Patrick J. Hartin explains that in order to understand better the meanings of the messages in the readings at the Mass, we need to, in a way, “relearn the biblical imagination.”⁶ Fr. Hartin explains that, “For an act of communication to take place there are three poles necessary.” They are, sender, “the one who initiates the act of communication, a message, that corresponds to the type of sender that is operating; verbal message; sounds; written messages; facial messages; subliminal messages. Finally, receivers.”⁷ Again, Fr. Hartin, adds that one of the forms of communication we experience in the scriptures is the written text. Fr. Hartin claims that there is an “art of writing.” He writes, “If I write a letter, my action of writing has a purpose of communicating a

⁴ What Happens at Mass, Driscoll, LTP, 2011 Pg. 43

⁵ Ibid Pg. 43

⁶ Introduction to the New Testament, Hartin Xanadu 2002 Pg. 5

⁷ Ibid Pg. 33

message to another person.”⁸Hence, you have an author communicating a message through a text. St. Paul used the genre of letters to both communicate the theological truths about Jesus Christ. Mainly, Paul writes, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4), and “I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread,

and, after he broke it and body that is for remembrance same way also



had given thanks, said, ‘This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after

supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). St. Paul had intended reader or community of readers for his letters in order to communicate the Paschal Mystery of Christ. St. Paul was very effective at communication. Fr. Hartin would call him an implied author who communicates well with the implied reader by influencing “the reader of the text by attempting to get the reader to have a point of view, which is in harmony with that of the [message].”⁹ Much of this applies to the Gospel narratives as well. In the teaching on the Gospel narratives used in liturgy I will speak of the importance of the narrator. But for the second reading many of St. Paul’s letters are used, which is a different genre.

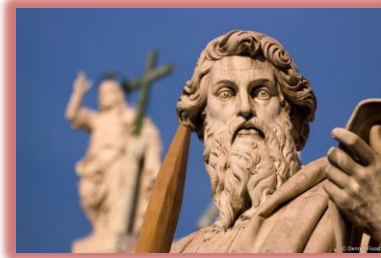
There are seven letters attributed to St. Paul are 1 Thessalonians 51 CE, Philippians 53-55 CE, Galatians 55 CE, Philemon 52-54 CE, 1 and 2 Letters to the Corinthians 55-56 CE, and Romans between 55-58 CE. The other “Epistles” or “Catholic Letters” that are used for the second reading are firstly the Duetero-Pauline

⁸ Ibid Pg. 33

⁹ Ibid

Letters (written by some of Paul's disciples). They include Ephesians, Colossians, 1-2 Timothy, and the Letter to Titus. In addition, other letters such as Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and the Letter to Jude and the Book of Revelation may be read.

Furthermore, "In the second reading the congregation often encounters the early Church living its Christian faith. The witnesses of the apostolic community provides an example for all time since Christians of every age are to recall the love of the Father enfleshed in Christ, the good news of redemption, the duty of Christian love. All followers of Jesus are to live decently and without blemish, to be tolerant of one another, to be steadfast in faith."¹⁰ Ultimately, True Disciples of Jesus "believe what the Apostles believed...we encounter the risen Lord through their witness."¹¹ The second reading is full of the early Christian communities witnessing to their encounter with the risen Lord. It is no different for us today as long as we are willing to listen with a sense of re-learned biblical imagination. We can place ourselves into the scriptures, we can be the receivers of the messages of the witnesses who had a message intended for believers in the first century and messages for believers to come. The second reading takes a special place on the Lord's day for our benefit.



¹⁰ The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Mass, Johnson, FDLC 2011 Pg. 37

¹¹ What Happens at Mass, Driscoll, LTP, 2011 Pg. 43

Photo Sources

St. Paul Writing Pg. 2

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St. Paul in Christ Pg. 4

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