

## **The Book of the Gospels**

*Paul Turner*

When we first discussed using a Book of the Gospels for Sunday Mass in addition to our lectionary, one liturgy committee member raised a serious objection: "But then people might get the idea that the Gospels are somehow more important than the rest of the Bible." Ah, blessed insight!

The liturgy practically stands on its head to give us that idea. In fact, so much happens at the moment the Gospel is proclaimed - greeting, kissing, crossing, incensing, standing, etc. - that only in slow motion can we really appreciate it for what it really is not just another Word of God, but the "Good News" spoken from the lips of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God.

But first a word from the entrance procession:

Long before the Gospel is proclaimed, it enters the liturgy with the opening procession. Some ministers want to include the Roman Missal in the procession. The Roman Missal, (the priest's prayer book,) remains at the chair, but the lectionary comes right up the aisle with the ministers. Zealous servers who want to carry something up should grab a candle, not the Missal.

There are two books for the readings - the lectionary and the Book of the Gospels - but some parishes just use the first. A lectionary contains all the scripture readings, including the Gospel. The Book of the Gospels is a book of Gospels only. No Isaiah, no Paul, just Gospels. It's usually larger than the lectionary to give it some dignity, and to set the Gospel apart.

In the entrance procession, the deacon should carry the Book of the Gospels. If there is no deacon, the reader performs this function.

The Book of the Gospels is placed on the altar during the entrance procession. It is best to set it lying down on the altar, rather than standing up, as is the practice in Eastern Rites. Placing the Gospels on the altar will signal the assembly right at the beginning of the service that Christ, who becomes present here in bread and wine, is already present in the word, and especially in the Gospel, where we hear his own words.

After the second reading, the assembly snaps to attention. The Liturgy of the Word saves the best for last. Even on a feast like Pentecost where the story of the feast comes in the first reading, not in the Gospel, the Gospel takes pride in being the last and most important of the readings. A lot

happens here:

A **procession** takes shape. This may be as simple as the presider tripping over the mike cord on his way to the ambo but it's a procession.

However the procession may be quite glorious: Servers may lead with **incense and candles** and the deacon or priest may walk from his chair to the altar, pick up the Gospel book, and carry it grandly in procession to the ambo, where the candle bearers fan out and incense billows above the ministers' heads

This is one of the four processions in a typical Mass (if you include entrance, presentation of the gifts, and communion), and hence it deserves a **song**.

**The Gospel acclamation** doesn't just mark time; it accompanies the procession and announces good news: Alleluia! So attentive is the liturgy to the Gospel that it retires the alleluia during Lent to heighten our anticipation for Easter. We sing "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, King of endless glory," or another text. Basically that just translates "alleluia" ("Praise God") from Hebrew back into English. (Maybe God doesn't understand Hebrew during Lent?) But the point is that the Gospel attracts detailed attention in the liturgy.

As soon as this gets under way **everybody stands**. (My bishop wryly claims that this is the only time Catholics stand together.) We reserve standing for some important moments in the Mass: saying prayers to God, receiving communion, and hearing the Gospel. We stand to honor Christ and to assert our readiness to practice this Gospel in our lives.

Note too that the Gospel is read by a **deacon**. Another priest may do so if there is no deacon, or as a last resort, the presider himself. Readings should be proclaimed by ministers who are not presiding. The deacon has been set apart by the church for a special ministry. The proclamation of the gospel is not intended to foster clericalism; it relies on the deacon so that more attention will go to the word, not to the minister.

Incidentally, the deacon is the one who directs the actions of the assembly: "Let us kneel." "Let us stand." "Let us offer the sign of peace." "Go in peace." The same voice that tells us what to do at Mass is the voice that proclaims the Gospel - a voice that implies this Gospel is also a call to action.

The deacon does not just run up and start reading. First he asks the priest for a **blessing**. If there is no deacon, the priest who reads prays that he may worthily proclaim the Gospel.

The Gospel is the only reading that starts with a **greeting**: "The Lord be with you," and ends with a special conclusion, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." Both phrases underscore the main theme: Jesus Christ is present in this reading.

There's more! The one who reads makes the **sign of the cross** on the book, his forehead, his lips, and his heart. The whole assembly does the same. The gesture blesses the word where we meet Christ, the mind that will hear him, the lips that proclaim him, and the heart that loves him.

Then as the reading ends, the reader kisses the book in love and reverence, and says, "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away." A prayer for reconciliation concludes the event.

All this happens in seconds, perhaps without our realization of how many symbols we use to honor the Gospel.

Some parishes decorate their Book of the Gospels with a magnificent cover and long festive ribbons that dance during the procession. Others keep a special bookcase just for the Word of God. That way it's not shoved onto the same shelf with the old rituals, unused hymnals, and leaflets from last year's penance services.

Whatever you do, let people meet Christ when the Gospel is proclaimed.

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