

The Structure and Correlation of the Readings for the Liturgy of the Word at a Sunday Mass

Example: Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah, saying: “Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and announce to it the message that I will tell you.” So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD’S bidding.

Now Nineveh was an enormously large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day’s walk announcing, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed, “when the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

R. (4a) Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths,
Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.

R. Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Remember that your compassion, O LORD, and your love are from of old.
In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O LORD.

R. Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way.
He guides the humble to justice and teaches the humble his way.

R. Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Reading II: 1 Cor 7:29-31

I tell you, brothers and sisters, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.

Alleluia: Mk 1:15

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

The kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the Gospel.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel: Mk 1:14-20

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Then they abandoned their nets and followed him. He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

The lectionary assumes that we know the full story of Jonah, so let's review the Book of Jonah:

Based around 780 BC, the book of Jonah is written during the time when the Assyrian empire was reaching its greatest power. Its capital Nineveh eventually conquered and took into captivity the northern kingdom of Israel in 722-721 BC.

Nineveh itself was a massive city and is recorded as being around 7 miles in circumference and heavily fortified with stone towers over 200 feet high and walls 50 feet thick.

The Ninevites were the sworn enemies of the Israelites. They worshiped false idols, offering human sacrifice and worship through temple prostitutes. In the eyes of a man of God such as Jonah, the Assyrians were an abomination worthy of the full measure of a righteous God's wrath.

This is the place into which the Lord sent Jonah (whose name in Hebrew means dove or messenger) with the message to the wicked Ninevites to repent or be judged. The Lord gave them 40 days until or face utter destruction. Jonah knew that if they repented then God would forgive them but Jonah, like all Jews, hated the Assyrians, so Jonah complains about being sent on this mission. He wanted to see the Ninevites destroyed. Jonah has been described as a bigot by some and a patriot by others (sound familiar?).

Jonah is not happy with his mission and so he runs from the presence of God. Jonah jumps on board a trading ship heading for Tarshish, which is in the opposite direction to Nineveh.

A storm brews up threatening to sink the ship which results in the crew drawing lots, to see who had brought this calamity upon them. Jonah is pointed out and confesses that it is his fault, telling them to throw him overboard to prevent any further disaster. The crew reluctantly agree, Jonah is thrown overboard straight into the mouth of a giant fish, that keeps him there for three days until Jonah finally repents and reluctantly agrees to the mission. He is puked up on the shore near the city of Nineveh, and his miraculous ministry causes everyone to repent in sackcloth and ashes – including the King and even the animals of the field.

God hears the cry of the Ninevites and their repentance and forgives them their sins – Jonah is furious about this. Hoping God will change his mind, Jonah sits down under a tree that the Lord has caused to grow up and awaits the destruction of Nineveh. But a worm comes, kills the tree, so Jonah is roasted under the hot sun and wishes that he would die. The story ends by God pointing out to Jonah that there is a lot more at stake than perhaps Jonah is thinking about.

“You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?” Jonah 4:10

An Analysis of the Readings

The structure of the readings is typical of what happens every Sunday. You could do this with any of the Sunday readings. There is a particular pairing between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading. They serve as the anchors showing how a particular mystery presented in the Old Testament reading is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

This is how the Church (always) reads the Scriptures in the Liturgy. The readings are a movement, as in a symphony, a preparation by way of reflection to manifestation. What's being manifested? Christ himself, the fullness of the revelation of the love of the Father in Jesus Christ

The first reading begins:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah saying, set out for the great city of Nineveh and announce to it the message that I will tell you. So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh.

The reading (pericope) omits reluctance, he doesn't listen. Jonah literally goes the other direction not wanting to do what God is asking. This is part of the mystery of Jonah. He doesn't want to proclaim repentance to the Gentiles because he wants the Gentiles to get destroyed.

This is one of the inhibitions to evangelization. “Do you mean that you *really* expect me to evangelize the world? Those people are barbarians! Why would I go to them? They're uncomfortable to be around. Have you heard the way they talk? Their language is horrible.” So we're often like Jonah. We want to go in the other direction when God says go and preach to the Gentiles and call them to repentance.

Again, the lectionary assumes that we know the full story which is going to include the mystery of the three days that Jonah is in the belly of the big fish. It's a 'typological' representation of Christ being in the belly of the earth for three days. The resurrection theme is there in the background, and we're expected to understand that. We're only getting snippets of a larger story, but we're supposed to have embraced the whole story in some measure so that we understand how the bits and pieces fit together.

This is why we have a cycle of readings. Over the course of three years, the Liturgy of the Word educates us as to the full breadth of the story.

So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh according to the Lord's bidding (after some cajoling). Now Nineveh was an enormously large city. It took three days to go through it.

Now he's been in the fish three days and now we see another three days. It's supposed to take three days to get to resurrection, but what happens? A surprise.

Jonah began his journey through the city and had gone but a single day's walk announcing 40 days more and Nineveh will be destroyed.

Numbers have significance for the Jews. The numbers 40 and 3 appear frequently in the Bible.

Forty is 4 times 10, the number of purification. Four is the number for the earth (recall the creation story) and 10 is the number for law or justice (recall the ten commandments). Recall that it rains for 40 days and 40 nights in the flood story, so this is a repetition of the flood story indicating justice is going to be done. Nineveh will be the recipient of God's justice in 40 days unless they repent.

When the people of Nineveh believed God and they proclaimed a fast and all of them great and small, put on sackcloth.

So it only takes one day! The Ninevites are a lot less stubborn than Jonah.

Notice the ironic comparison between Jonah and the Ninevites. Jonah just spent three days in the belly of the fish, and it should take three days for Nineveh too, but Nineveh is transformed in one day. So it becomes an indictment against the prophet. So, Jonah does what he's supposed to do, but we know the story of Jonah. He does a lot of complaining and blaming. He will be annoyed they repented because he (all Jews) doesn't like these foreigners. Jonah is not happy about this whole thing. He's a partisan. We tend to be partisans. We take sides. This is our team. It's our team against that team.

And so part of the message is teaching us not to be partisan but rather to be generous distributors of God's manifold gifts. And sometimes we get amazing surprises. We often think our efforts are not going to work. They're way too stiff-necked. Jonah gets quite a surprise.

So when the people of Nineveh believe God, they proclaimed a fast, all of them great and small, and put on sackcloth. When God saw by their actions how they turn from their evil way he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do them and he did not carry it out.

There is a commentary from St. Thomas Aquinas on this text where he asks, "How is it that this prophecy and promise by God is reneged upon? Does that mean that prophecy or God's Word doesn't have the firmness of his own immutability?" And he says, "no," and that's very consoling. It means that everything is always conditional. If we repent, we don't have to receive the punishment which will necessarily be applied if we refuse to repent. If we can repent we can escape the punishment we very much deserve. That's always the case for each individual and for society as a whole. Once we say yes to God's justice, we receive his mercy, which is simultaneously both. So we have this tendency to think that that mercy is escaping justice. Part of the mystery is precisely that we receive mercy by asking that God's justice be applied. It's not applied at the same measure. We know that we deserve hell by our sins. So we get a superabundance of mercy. This is the importance of mortification in the spiritual life, which is a voluntary reception of the divine justice for the sake of more deeply experiencing God's mercy.

Now notice what happens in Responsorial Psalm. And this is characteristic of the way the Responsorial Psalm works. It responds to the first reading, which is a third person event. What happens so the Ninevites becomes a first-person event in the Psalm.

Teach me Your ways, O Lord.

In the Responsorial Psalm we are saying, "I'm one of the Ninevites. I need Jonah. So "Teach me your ways, O Lord." It's a recollection which works manifestation. What is being manifested? *I* am the Ninevites. *I'm* the one who needs repentance; Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.

R. Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Remember that your compassion, O LORD, and your love are from of old. In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O LORD.

R. Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice and teaches the humble his way.

R. Teach me your ways, O Lord.

So what was a third-person event in the first reading is now a first person event in the Psalm. I am the person who needs what Nineveh has received. This is always the way the Responsorial Psalm works. The Psalms are the Songs of Israel, so they're usually in the first person. It's we, it's I, depending on the specific referent.

Through remembrance, that thing which is remembered is happening now, in the present.

So the 'symphony' of the liturgy is:

- Preparation (penitential rite)
- Recollection (first reading)
- Manifestation (gospel)
- Presence (Parousia, Eucharist)

The presence is obviously the real presence of Christ Himself who's the full expression of these mysteries, already coming to be present in the Church's liturgy which is recollecting these mysteries from the old covenant, typically through the Old Testament reading, and then the Responsorial Psalm.

The Second Reading. After the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) a large amount of this epistolary literature is added into the Mass. It's put in there serially, so we move through, in this case, First Corinthians, not reading all of it, but substantial sections of it in one portion of the liturgical year. They're not specifically intended to match up with the typological theme from the first reading from the Old Testament and the Gospel reading, but it's remarkable how often they do, even though they're just running serially through the through the epistles.

In the Psalm we heard "Teach me your ways, O Lord." Now Paul is addressing the Church as a whole.

I tell you, brothers and sisters, the **time is running out.**

We could say 40 days more and Nineveh will be destroyed.

From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.

So this is a very sober expression of one of the fundamental truths of Christian life. We are sojourners here, we are pilgrims, our true home as in heaven. We're supposed to live in the world but not be of it.

In the Mass we thank God for the blessings of creation, but we always hold them lightly. We don't we don't white-knuckle our grasp of the things that God has given us. In thanking him for them more precisely by giving them back, recognizing that the world is passing away. That everything in the temporal realm can't satisfy us fully, and only God himself will do so.

So once again, it's a very clear echo of what we're seeing in the first reading. And also in the Responsorial Psalm, this representation that I need conversion, and the only thing that can help me to do that is this recognition that the world is a passing reality, and that heaven is eternal.

What do we see then in the Gospel?

Once again, the first chapter and Mark,

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God:

What's before this? Just as we have to know what happened before when we read the pericope from Jonah, what's already happened in the gospel? The baptism of Jesus and his going into the desert for 40 days or penance. "Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed." Here Jesus has already done that penance. It was his offering for the sake of the world, for the whole of Nineveh, which is the world because the world in its present form is passing away.

So we (should) know that John the Baptist has been arrested and has been carried away. This is an important part in Mark's description because it has to do with the onset of the passion. Mark's gospel has been described as a passion narrative with some other stuff added to it. Mark's community in Rome is pressed upon by persecution. Reminding them of John's ordeal and the imminent suffering of Jesus will the persecuted Roman Christians hope and strength to endure their trials.

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. **Repent**, and believe in the gospel."

The first word is repent. Sometimes we tend to overlook that. We think that Jesus' first proclamation is the saving love of God. It certainly is that. That's the central kernel, but that's the reason we repent, so that we can enter into that mystery and receive this great gift we've been offered. But the first word that Jesus really utters is, "The time of fulfillment is at here. The kingdom of God is at hand." So what are we supposed to do? Repent. That's the imperative. "Repent and believe in the Gospel."

So Jesus begins with his proclamation of the coming of the kingdom and the necessity for repentance and belief in this good news, which he is about to spend his whole ministry disclosing.

If you need a hint linking the first reading to the gospel, the liturgy provides one. Look at the gospel acclamation. It provides the link. "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel."

The gospel continues:

As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Then ...

"Then" is in the lectionary. In the RSV, which renders this better, it's immediately, and that word in Greek really does mean "immediately," and Mark uses it over and over and over again. So it's one of the characteristic elements of Mark is that everything happens *immediately*.

... Immediately they abandoned their nets and followed him.

In John's gospel, we get more background information. The disciples spend time with Jesus first. "Come and see." John talks about the wonderful time when they first met him. Mark skips all that and goes straight to the calling. And what happens? He calls them and they drop their nets right now. Mark doesn't include the earlier material John does. It sounds all the more immediate. Like, "Are you nuts? You just met this guy and you're literally dropping your livelihood, leaving your family, and wandering off in his company?" Because that's the way it reads in Mark. This is one of the elements of Mark's gospel; events happen right away, immediately. One scholar (Timothy Gray) suggests the necessity of immediacy in Mark is because Mark's community in Rome is under pressure by way of persecution.

... they abandoned their nets and followed him. He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

Interesting to note is that they are fishers of men. Jonah gets swallowed by a fish. So there's a remote but interesting connection there. Where did Jonah go when he ran away from God's commission? He went to Joppa. Joppa is the place where Peter receives the vision of the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 10:9-16). So Joppa is sort of a mystery of the inclusion of the Gentiles.

There are many other things we could note here, but what you can see here is that Jesus is the new Jonah. He's the full expression of Jonah. Later in Mark's gospel that Jesus will say, "You have a greater than Jonah here." He also says, "You have a greater than Solomon here." So Jesus is the fulfillment of all these precursor typological figures who represent the eventual Messiah who has now arrived in the person of Jesus, so the kingdom of God is at hand.

And all of this represents a fourfold meditation on the mystery of Jonah. The mystery of repentance, the arrival of the kingdom, the mystery of the 40, the mystery of the three days. All these things are tightly wrapped up in here and represents the very means by which we enter into this mystery. This is the ancient tradition of the Church.

St. Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165) says, once again at 1345, as regards the Liturgy of the Word, he says:

The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits.

The prophets are found in the Old Testament and then the memoirs of the apostles are the gospels. We don't have a fully established Old or New Testament canon yet, but they're already starting to gather these texts that will become the Bible. So it would have been an extended reflection upon the content of God's prophetic word from the Old Testament, its fulfillment as disclosed in the memoirs of the apostles, the gospels. From ancient times we have a recollection and its manifestation of Christ through the Liturgy of the Word. What we can't get to in the reading that day is summed up in our the of faith, the creed, to which all respond "Amen." Finally, there is the Parousia, the coming, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

I hope that you'll now look at the Liturgy of the Word in a whole new way.