

## The First Reading

Now that we've done a general introduction to the biblical readings in the lectionary, what I'd like to do is just walk through each particular reading and look at them. And in this video I want to focus on the First Reading, which is almost always from the Old Testament. So if you have a Roman Missal, for example, and you open it up to the Order of Mass, and you go to the Liturgy of the Word, you're going to see a very simple description, and it's going to say this:

*Then the reader (Latin lector) goes to the ambo and reads the First Reading, while all sit and listen. To indicate the end of the reading, the reader acclaims:*

*The word of the Lord.*

All reply:

*Thanks be to God.*

(Roman Missal, *Order of Mass*, no. 10)

So a very simple procedure for the First Reading, but very, very important in the Liturgy of the Word. So let's walk through this together. The first question I want to ask is why do we have a first reading? Why is it almost always from the Old Testament? Where is that in Scripture? Where is that in tradition? And then what am I supposed to be doing during the First Reading? What's my disposition spiritually and interiorly during this particular part of the Mass? And one reason we have to ask this is because there are Christians throughout history, ever since the time of Marcion in the 2nd century AD. He was an early heretic who said out with the old, in with the New. We don't need the Old Testament, we just need the New Testament. Jesus came to abolish the old and bring in the new. That was Marcion's heresy. And so Marcion would not have been a fan of the First Reading in the lectionary and in the liturgy. But in fact, the idea of not just starting with the New Testament but going all the way back to the Old Testament, is something that is in fact deeply rooted in Scripture, and believe it or not, also in tradition, as well as some of the postures that we take when we're listening to the readings, like sitting and listening, and our responses to it interiorly and exteriorly. So let's look at that for just a minute.

First thing would be this. The idea of reading the Old Testament in the liturgical assembly is something that goes all the way back, literally, to the Torah itself, to the Law of Moses in the first five books of the Bible. So in the book of Deuteronomy 31, this is kind of Moses' last will and testament. So before the people enter into the Promised Land, he's going to give them some advice, or should I say commands, on how to live the faith of Israel in the one true God when they enter into the land. And one of the important pieces of advice that he's going to give to them. One of the important commands he's going to give them is that they should read from the book of the law as an assembly in the public hearing of the people of God, so that they can be instructed in the word of God. So this is from Deuteronomy 31:9-13:

And Moses wrote this law, and gave it to the priests the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time of the year of release, at the feast of booths, when *all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place which he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess.*” (Deuteronomy 31:9-13)<sup>1</sup>

So pause there. Notice something really important. Moses doesn't just give the law to the priests, he also instructs the priests to read the law to the people when they gather for the Feast of Tabernacles. Now, this is not every week, like they will later do in the synagogue. Tabernacles is an annual festival, and so the reading of the law happens at the end of every seven years during this annual festival of Tabernacles. So, it is occasional in that sense, but we already see the principle of reading the Torah not just to the priest, but to the people, and not just to the men,

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

but to the men, the women and the children, so that they can hear the law, they can live according to the law and so that they can fear the Lord God, meaning respect him, have awe of him and obey His commandments. Now, that's in the time of the Exodus at Moses day.

If you fast forward all the way to the 1st century AD at the time of Jesus, there's going to be a lot of development that happens. By the time you get to Jesus' day, the synagogue has developed — i.e., they have places of worship and prayer throughout the land of Israel, not just in the Temple, but throughout all of the cities of the people of Israel. And you're not just going to have occasional readings of the law at the Feast of Tabernacles after a 7 year period, you're actually going to have weekly reading of both the Law and the Prophets in the synagogues every single Sabbath day. Every Sabbath you go in, you're going to hear the Law read, you're going to hear the Prophets read, and then you're going to hear a homily or sermon explaining those things as well. So again, we've looked at this passage, so I'm not going to quote it, but in the Gospel Luke 4, Jesus goes into the synagogue at Nazareth on the Sabbath day, and they give him what was effectively the second reading at that time, the reading from the prophet Isaiah. He reads it, and then he preaches a homily or a sermon about it. So, in other words, the idea of reading the Old Testament in liturgical assembly, in the assembly of the people of God, not just the priest, but the men, the women, and the children, is something that we get from Judaism. It's something we get from Scripture. It's something Jesus and Mary and Joseph would have practiced as a regular part of their practice of the faith of Israel, their practice of the religion of Judaism.

Now that Jewish tradition of reading the Old Testament on a regular basis every week is going to pass over into Christian tradition and into the New Testament practice of the early Church. We'll look at the tradition in just a second from Christians, and from the Roman church in particular, but I do want to highlight something. It isn't just the New Testament that bears witness to the this Jewish custom. It's also writers from the time of Jesus. So I wanted to give you just one example of this from Jewish tradition, from a writer I don't cite as much as Josephus. You've heard me say Josephus many times. But this is an important writer. His name is Philo of Alexandria. Philo is important because he was a Jewish writer living as a contemporary with Jesus. So he lived at the same time as Jesus.

But he didn't live in the Holy Land. He lived in Egypt. He lived in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a writer and a philosopher. And he gives us an important description of Jewish synagogues at the time of Jesus and of their practice of reading the scriptures, reading what we call the Old Testament in the liturgy. And this is what Philo says about the synagogue readings:

Accordingly, on the seventh day there are spread before the people in every city innumerable lessons of prudence, and temperance, and courage, and justice, and all other virtues; during the giving of which *the common people sit down, keeping silence and pricking up their ears, with all possible attention, from their thirst for wholesome instruction; but some of those who are very learned explain to them what is of great importance and use,* lessons by which the whole of their lives may be improved. (Philo, Special Laws 2.62)<sup>2</sup>

Now, what's interesting about Philo's description of reading the Old Testament, reading the Jewish scriptures in the synagogue is a few things. First, notice he says that they sit down and they listen. So, this is an important witness to the fact that seats were part of the Jewish assembly. They were part of the synagogue. They didn't just stand. They would stand to pray, but they would sit to listen. Why? So that they could be attentive to the reading of the word of God. Second, notice also that the reason they're listening to the Scripture is so that they can improve their lives, so that they can grow in virtues. And it's really interesting here, before the Church Fathers mentioned the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude, Philo gives those as the virtues that the Jews are learning. So even our moral tradition as Catholics about virtue comes from ancient Judaism. So I thought this is really fascinating. And then finally, you'll also see that the reading from the Old Testament needed to be explained. And if you've ever read the Old Testament, you know why, right? The meaning and the way to apply the Old Testament, whether it's the books of the Law or the books of the Prophets, is not always immediately obvious. They require some explanation. They're complex. They're long. Sometimes they can be troubling and maybe even, you know, difficult to understand, maybe a little scandalous. Some of the things you

---

<sup>2</sup> In *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (trans. C. D. Yonge; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 574.

find in the Old Testament, Christians will often be puzzled, like, what does this mean and how do I apply it to my life? Well, same thing was true in Judaism. People who were learned in the scriptures would explain the scriptures to the men, women, and children gathering in the synagogue. So reading from the Old Testament is part of biblical teaching. It's one of the commandments of Moses. It's also part of the Jewish tradition that we see at the time of Jesus and in the life of Jesus himself.

So it's not a surprise that when we fast forward into like the 2nd century AD and we start to look at the Roman Church, the church at Rome, that we're going to find early Christians, the early Church Fathers, frequently talking about the reading of the Old Testament as a constitutive part of the liturgy of the Church. For example, in the 2nd century AD, I've quoted him before, I'm not going to do it again here; St. Justin Martyr talks about the fact that the writings of the Prophets are read for as long as time permits in the Roman liturgy. So the Old Testament reading was part of the Roman liturgy from the beginning, all the way into the 2nd century AD. And you'll notice, he says, as long as time permits. In other words, these were long readings from the Old Testament, and that's something that's true of the lectionary to this day. In fact, one of my favorite Old Testament readings isn't from Sunday Mass, but it's from daily mass. It's from the book of Daniel. It's the story of Susanna, and it is one of the longest readings in the lectionary, but it's also just a great story. It's a fascinating story. And so we'll often have a kind of a long reading from the Old Testament because we are learning about the history of salvation. We're learning what God has done for his people in the Old Covenant as a preparation for what he will do through Jesus Christ in the New Covenant.

A second point from the Roman tradition that I think is important to note is who does the First Reading? Who reads the First Reading? It is of course permissible for a priest to do all the readings at any Mass, if necessity dictates. However, the tradition of reading is that the First Reading would be done not by an ordained minister, but by a lector, by the reader. It is called the reader in English, but the Latin word for that is Lector. And the idea of a particular person being appointed to read this First Reading is something that's very ancient in the Roman tradition. So, for example, there's an ancient book, a very important book, attributed to St. Hippolytus, who was one of the early Church Fathers. He was a priest in Rome in

the 3rd century. He was martyred for the faith. This document on the *Apostolic Tradition* is attributed to St. Hippolytus and for a large part of the 20th century, was believed to reflect the liturgy of the Church at Rome in the 2nd century and in the early 3rd century AD. Without going into the details of that debate, there are scholars like Alistair Stewart, who published this edition, who do think that this text, the *Apostolic Tradition*, it may not reflect the one Roman liturgy at the time of St. Hippolytus, but it definitely is an important witness to Roman liturgical practices in the 2nd and 3rd century AD. And so in this text, it describes the office of reader, and this is what it says about the reader:

*The reader is appointed when the bishop gives him the book, for hands are not laid on him.*<sup>3</sup>

Notice what we have there is it describing a person being appointed to do the readings, but they're not ordained, so hands have not been laid on them. They're not ordained to the diaconate, they're not ordained to the priesthood or the episcopacy. They are effectively what we would think of as a layperson, someone who has not received the sacrament of Holy Orders. So this is an ancient Roman tradition that someone who is not ordained would be appointed lector to read the First Reading, the reading from the Old Testament. Now, with that in mind, there's a couple of interesting witnesses to this Old Testament reading. As I've mentioned in earlier videos, although in some versions or examples of the Roman liturgy from the 5th, 6th, 7th centuries, there's only a two-cycle reading. You have a reading from the Apostle called the Epistle and then you have the Gospel. St. Augustine actually bears witness to that older custom of a three-reading cycle in his writings, and he gives us a little bit of a window into how the First Reading functioned in the Latin speaking at North Africa in the time that he was writing. So, for example, this is a copy of one of many volumes of the hundreds and hundreds of sermons that St. Augustine gave when he was bishop of the Church of Hippo in North Africa. And in this sermon, he's speaking to the people, and you actually see him refer to the First Reading and the Second Reading and the Gospel, this older system of three readings that we have today in the contemporary Roman Missal. So listen to the language St. Augustine uses here:

---

<sup>3</sup> Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 11. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:203.

Cast your minds back to *the first reading* from the prophet Isaiah, because we can't possibly remember or talk about everything that has been read... [quotes Isa 57:13]. Then up comes *a reading from the apostle* [Paul], and it begins with these words... [quotes 2 Cor 7:1]. [I]n Isaiah we are promised something, while in the apostle we are told, "Having therefore these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement..." as though it were only one reading from the prophet and the apostle.<sup>4</sup>

So notice what Augustine's doing there is, and the reason I'm reading this is, it shows us that in the Church of North Africa, which followed the customs of Rome, Augustine is going to make that very clear elsewhere, they didn't just start with the reading from St. Paul, they also had a preliminary reading from the prophet Isaiah. And Augustine gives that the name, the First Reading. So in the lectionary to this day, when we have our Old Testament reading, the Church calls it the First Reading. Because even though throughout most of the year it's from the Old Testament, in the Easter season it'll actually be from the Acts of the Apostles, so we can't just call it the Old Testament reading. It really is just the first reading of the three readings in the cycle. The second thing that Augustine gives us a little window into the Liturgy of the Word in his day in the Latin-speaking churches is that he also tells us the posture with which the people in the churches of Italy heard the readings of Mass.

And one reason this is a point of debate is because you'll sometimes see on the Internet — this has become popular to say that seats or pews were invented by the Protestant reformers and didn't really exist until the 16th century. I've seen people talk about this from time to time on the Internet, and the impression sometimes given is that for the 1st 15 centuries, everyone stood in the liturgy for the entire liturgy, and it was really just Protestants who invented the idea of sitting during the liturgy. And that's just false. That's not true. It is true that in many places much of the liturgy, if not all of it, was done standing. That's actually very true. There was often a custom of standing during the liturgy. But according to the New Testament

---

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Sermon* 45.1. In Saint Augustine, *Sermons II: 20-50* (Works of Saint Augustine, III/2; trans. Edmund Hill, O.P.; New York, N.Y.: New City Press, 1992), 285.

itself, as well as Jewish tradition, in the synagogues, Jews sat when they listened to the readings. I mean, you only have to know the Gospels to know this. Jesus talks about the fact that the scribes and Pharisees take the “best seats in the synagogue”, Matthew 23. And then there are other examples, like James 1, where it talks about the rich people sitting down during the liturgy, whereas the poor were made to stand over here. So there's a difference between sitting and standing in the New Testament writers. But Augustine is the one who tells us that apparently in Rome there was a custom of sitting while listening to the scriptures. So listen to what Augustine says in his book *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*. He writes this:

In certain overseas churches [=Italy] *not only are bishops seated to address the people, but seats are available for the people too*. Thus it can be avoided that a frail person, worn out by standing, would be distracted from his highly salutary purpose or even forced to leave.<sup>5</sup>

So basically the point is Augustine not only bears witness to the cycle of multiple readings, Old Testament like the First Reading and others, but he also tells us that in the churches of Rome, people would sit during the reading. Why? So that they wouldn't get distracted or tired or have to leave if they were elderly or infirm, but they would be able to listen to the words attentively. Which also suggests, by the way, that the readings were somewhat lengthy, if standing for the whole of the readings would be a challenge for some people who might be infirm or have some kind of physical difficulty with that,. So it's very interesting that we have both Jewish and Christian witnesses to the tradition of reading from the Old Testament, sitting during the reading, and listening with attention. So don't get distracted during those Old Testament readings. This is a very, very important part of the Liturgy of the Word.

Which brings us to our final question of what am I supposed to be doing during the First Reading? Like, what's my interior disposition supposed to be? What have the Saints throughout the centuries said about this part of the Mass, about the First Reading? And here I would turn to one other Saint and Doctor of the Church, not

---

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* 13,19. In Augustine of Hippo, *Instructing Beginners in Faith* (trans. Raymond Canning; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2006), 49.



just St. Augustine, but one of my favorite writers on the Mass, which is St. Isidore of Seville. St. Isidore is living in what we would call Spain today, in the 6th century AD. And he has a description of the liturgy which was in Latin at that time. in Spain, and he talks about the Liturgy of the Word, and in particular the readings from the Old Testament and how we are to receive them. So I just want you to end with this and think about what St. Isidore is saying here and ask yourself, what is my disposition during the readings? Am I attentive? Am I distracted? What am I doing while the word of God is being proclaimed to me? And here's what St. Isidore Seville said about it:

*Tradition teaches that to proclaim the reading is an ancient institution of the Jews.*

So pause there. It's the Jewish roots of the First Reading. St. Isidore of Seville actually points to the fact that the reason we read the Old Testament is because the Jews did in the synagogue. He continues:

*For indeed on the legitimate and prescribed days they used readings from the Law and the Prophets in the synagogues. [The churches of Christ preserve this by ancient institution of the Fathers.] The reading is not an unimportant building up of the hearers. Thus, it is proper that when psalms are being chanted they be chanted by all, that when there is praying all pray, and that when the reading is being read, silence is made, so that it may be heard by all. For even if then someone were to come in while the reading is being celebrated, he would simply adore God and, having marked his forehead, solicitously lend his ear, laying aside his prayer lest he lose the reading. (It is clear that we must pray with all during the time of praying, it is also clear that he can pray privately when he wishes.) We do this because it is not always possible that one have a reading at hand, while the ability to pray is always present.*

All right, so pause there for just a second. St. Isidore saying something very important. First, he's saying that the Old Testament reading is a tradition from the Jews and from the Church Fathers, so it's part of the tradition of the Church. Second, it's important that when the reading is being done, everybody be silent so

that we can listen. And he recognizes that some people might not like that because they're like, well, I want to come into Church to pray. I want to do my prayers. And he says no, no, no, you can pray on your own time, but when the reading is being read, everyone should be attentive to what is being said, because, especially in the 6th century, not everybody had Bibles. So if your one chance to hear the word of God might be then at Mass during the liturgy, and so you don't want to miss that opportunity to hear the word of God that is being proclaimed. One reason this second point is important is because you might remember from your own life or you might be familiar with the fact that in the 20th century, for example, and actually before that as well, up to the Second Vatican Council, the readings at Mass, like the Epistle or the Gospel, were done in Latin. They were sometimes done at a low mass in a low voice so that the people couldn't hear the reading, either because it was done inaudibly or because it was done in a language they didn't understand. So what had become customary in many churches in the Roman Rite was that the faithful would pray the rosary or do some private prayers while the priest is reciting the words of God, while he's reading the word of God in Latin.

Now in the 20th century became customary to reread the scriptures in the vernacular, but that was a recent development, from most centuries the scriptures were read in Latin, and unless the faithful knew Latin, they wouldn't understand what being said, so they would pray on their own by themselves, doing various devotions and things to help their entering into the Mass through those prayers. But it's interesting that already St. Isidore in the 6th century is saying that it's more fitting for a person in the liturgy to actually listen to the readings so that they can be edified. You can pray at a different time, but at this point the assembly should be united so that everyone, not just the priests and ministers, but everyone can hear and understand and be edified by the readings right now. Now, obviously that's going to imply, and this would have been the case in St. Isidore's day, that when the readings were in Latin, people understood because people are still speaking Latin. That's the vernacular of the day. We'll look at the issue of language in a different video, but for now I just want you to see that Isidore presupposes that everyone can hear and everyone can understand the readings and that this isn't a time for prayer. Is a time for listening to the word of God. And the final point he makes, if we go back to his text, is this — this is really good because sometimes people can be

tempted to be distracted during the readings and St. Isidore already recognizes that in the 6th century. So this is what he says:

*Nor should you think there is little usefulness generated from hearing the reading. Perchance the prayer itself may grow stronger when the mind, filled by a recent reading, runs through images of divine things that it has recently heard. For even Mary the sister of Martha “who listened” more intently to “what he was saying, and sat at the Lord’s feet,” having neglected her sister, was strengthened by the voice of the Lord [who said] that she had “chosen the better part” [Luke 10:39-42]. Thus also the deacon in a clear voice admonishes silence so that, whether psalms are being chanted or the reading is being read, unity might be conserved by all, so that what is preached to all might be heard equally by all.<sup>6</sup>*

So notice what St. Isidore of Seville is saying here. He's saying don't give in to the temptation to think that the part of the Mass where we are doing the readings is unimportant. It's not. It's very important for the building up of the hearers, because at the reading, during the readings, we are like Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to the voice of the Lord. So our posture during this part of the liturgy should be one of silent receptivity, not doing something else that's distracted and not listening to the readings, but silently receiving the words, just like Mary sat at the feet of the Lord to receive the word of the Lord from the Word made Incarnate, Jesus Christ. So, I don't know about you, but for me, this section from St. Isidore, it really helped me enter into this mystery of this part of the liturgy. Because what he's saying is, instead of praying about something else and being distracted or thinking about something else during the readings, if you focus on the reading, the reading can actually strengthen the prayer that will follow, because you're going to receive divine words, divine images, divine insights that then you can take and meditate on. Right? Meditate on what you have recently heard in the liturgy, just like Mary listened to the words of the Lord at the feet of the Lord beside her sister Martha. And in doing so, she chose the better part. So there was a custom in the ancient Church, you'll find this in many ancient descriptions of the liturgy. I don't know if Hippolytus is one of them, but in several descriptions of the liturgy, you'll

---

<sup>6</sup> Isidore of Seville, *On the Ecclesiastical Offices*, 10.1-3. In Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, 33.

hear the deacon's role is "SILENCE." He actually yells to everybody, basically, "Be quiet and listen to the word of the Lord."