

It was a wonderful present for a bibliophile, albeit I was only seven years old. I had made my first Holy Communion and one of the gifts was a missal, a book of the Mass for a grown up not a child. All the prayers and readings of the Mass were there and a lot of others besides, in the slim, blue hardback book with incredibly thin pages whose edges were gold. It was meant to look like what it indeed was: a treasure store, precious, valuable.

That many of the pages were in Latin was not a problem. I was to learn how to say the important words when I began to serve Mass as my two elder brothers were doing already. What the words meant was not as important as being able to pronounce them in response to what the priest said. In due time I learnt my lines (In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritui Sancti. **Amen. Dominus Vobiscum. Et cum spiritu tuo.** Intribo ad altare Dei. **Ad deum qui laetificat iuventutem meum...** and on) The words were printed in bold but honour required they be quickly learnt by heart. My two brothers were Latin enforcers in their spare time.

A feature of that precious tome was that, when it came to the readings for each Sunday Mass, half the page was taken up with a Latin text and the other half with English. A few years earlier than my first Holy Communion not a word of English was spoken in the Mass. Then as a concession, missals such as mine were printed with an English translation and later the English of the Gospel was read after it had been proclaimed in Latin. It was a strange world one entered when you came into church, and one we accepted without thought. That was how it was.

What mattered was being there when mighty things happened. In the silence of the Holy, Christ became present among us. His coming was announced with a series of bells, or the clangs of a gong. But he came, and we worshipped. Few participated in Holy Communion. It was too awesome and we were too unworthy. But we were there when it happened. That was what counted.

That counted far more than listening to and understanding the Word of God. That was what Protestants did. We had the Mass and the candles and the bells. We had Christ among us.

And so my grandparents and my parents lived and died largely ignorant of God's saving Word. Even when everything was in English and accessible, there was for them something not quite right in hearing the Bible and having it explained. Not that the homily explained very much. Catholic priests in England largely shared that distance from the Word. But that did not matter. We had the Catechism, many of whose answers were learnt by heart in school.

Today's Gospel passage sounds rather like the one we will hear next week. Both are parts of a long discourse Jesus gave in Capharnaum. They are similar, but close examination shows that they have a different emphasis. Throughout Jesus is describing himself as the Bread of Life. But in this first part of the discourse the image is of teaching, learning, hearing, understanding. Man lives not on bread alone but on every **word** that comes from God. The word is key. Hearing and understanding is all important. Jesus says, "as it is **written** in the prophets, 'They will all be **taught** by God, and to hear the teaching of the Father, and **learn** from it, is to come to me."

In the second half, next week, we will have an emphasis on eating and drinking. Here the accent is on listening and comprehending.

In the two parts of the discourse, we have the two part of the Mass, given equal importance. We share in two tables: the table of the Word – focussed here on the ambo (or lectern) and the Book; before we move to bringing forward the bread and wine which are placed on the second table, the altar.

In times past it has been the altar and the consecration that we have thought essential. Now we appreciate that both are equally important and compliment each other. Word and Eucharist inter-relate. We must venerate the Lord in the Eucharist, and take him into our selves materially as we have always done; and we must venerate the Lord in his Word, and take him into ourselves intellectually. The Lord is present to us in Word and in Eucharist.

Slowly the Catholic community is beginning to appreciate the gift of God's Word. People are reading the Bible with more understanding, and discovering it is a treasure trove. And a good read. Here, some of you shared in a long course on the Old Testament , and congratulations to those many of you who stuck with it through its twenty sessions. This Autumn a shorter course on the New Testament will take place here in Church. Given by myself and my colleague Greg Ryan, over ten weeks, again on Monday evenings; details are on the notice board and will soon be on the web site.

Jerome's pithy saying remains true: "*To be ignorant of Scripture is to be ignorant of Christ*". Therefore to know more of the Sacred texts is to know Christ all the more. And knowing him in his Word deepens our appreciation of the gift given to us in the Eucharist.

It was all there in that precious book given at my First Holy Communion, but only partly and slowly understood.