

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD AND THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST¹

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Chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke describes the encounter of the two disciples, Luke and Cleopas, with Christ as they were on the road to Emmaus, and there are two essential elements described in this Gospel: the interpretation of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread. Our Lord explains the Scriptures to them—He explains what we would call the Old Testament—and then He breaks the bread; He offers them His own body to consume, known to them in the breaking of the bread.

These two elements, of course, are pervasive in our lives. The Liturgy itself is split into these two parts, sometimes called the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, or the Liturgy of the Catechumen and the Liturgy of the Faithful; the first section is an instructional time: the antiphons, the psalms, the readings of the Epistle and Gospel, the homily. There is this time of instruction in which the Word is open to us in various ways, in which we reflect on it and meditate on it. Then, of course, is the Eucharist in which our Lord offers Himself to us, gives Himself to us to consume.

One of the interesting things, when we think about consuming the Word, or reading the Word—since we live post-printing press, post-Protestant transformation of the world—we often think of the Bible as something that we read on our own. Our exposure to the Word or Scriptures is primarily a private study, reflection, or meditation. But in ancient times, this was less so; only 10% of the population, by most estimates, was literate. Many people had memorized significant portions of the Scriptures, especially the Psalms. Nevertheless, to be exposed to the Word of God, you had to come to Church where the Scriptures were read. You had to listen; it was an oral culture. Commonly people were in church for Matins in the morning and Vespers in the evening. There were often sermons given during those

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times; many of the sermons that we have from the Holy Fathers were preached at Matins or Vespers, not just at Divine Liturgy.

This was the context in which we were enlightened as to the meaning of the Scriptures. Something is lost if we think too much of the Scriptures as being a private experience. There is an important aspect in which it is a public, oral experience that we share together. In that context, we have a common terminology, a common discourse in which we communicate with one another. We hear the same readings, the same sermons, and then we can process it from there; we may or may not talk about it with one another, but it is what we hold in common; it shapes our thinking.

What is noticeable to me about this text is the contrast of how these two followers of Christ describe their experience of Christ's teaching with the experience of Christ's breaking of the bread. They say, "Were not our hearts warmed within us when He opened to us the Scriptures?" (Lk. 24:35). There was an inner light, an inner comfort or harmony or satisfaction that things that seemed dark in the Scriptures were now made available to them. But when they describe partaking of the bread and Christ breaking the bread for them, they said, "Our eyes were opened." They could see. It is very different. They do not say that the Scripture opened their eyes. Sometimes we speak that way; we study the Scriptures and we see something we did not see before or they help us see the world in a different way. Surely they play that role, but here it is really the sense in which the teaching Christ gave the disciples was all very preparatory. It was cultivating the ground. It was readying them, readying their souls and their hearts to experience Him, to experience Him in the breaking of the bread. And it was that mystical experience in the breaking of the bread that truly opened their eyes. In the opening of the eyes, clearly this image—not of thinking and reasoning and calculating and contemplating and trying to understand like we do when we think about reading or studying the Scriptures—clearly this image of having our eyes opened means to have this direct, unmediated experience of Christ Himself, this mystical experience.

Correspondingly, in the two sections of the Divine Liturgy, it is very much the same way. The Scriptures are not an end in themselves. In my years as a Protestant, in the churches I attended, we had a communion service once every three or four months, and maybe not even then. That was not the important part. The important part was a 45-minute sermon and a few hymns on either side of it. The focus was on this, as it were, "warming of the heart," but there was a complete loss of the

sense of this unmediated experience of Christ. It was thinking and calculating and reasoning and all very interesting and important, but somehow all of that kind of reasoning can still keep Christ at a distance. So as much as we need it, and we do need to have it in a way in which it is alive and refreshing, yet also in a way that is not an end in itself. It really is the kind of preparation and cultivation of the heart for that moment when we come to have the bread broken in our midst and to experience Christ in this unmediated way.

Practically speaking, when we come to the Divine Liturgy, it is important to be in the service to hear these words, to experience these teachings, because that is warming our hearts, instructing us, preparing us. It is important for us to be here for that, and it is important for us to see that as directing us towards the Body and Blood of Christ. On the other hand, it is important to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. It is important for us, in a certain sense, not to make ourselves Protestants by only coming to the services and not going to Communion except once a year or so.

These two experiences are woven together in this story of the Road to Emmaus with these two followers of Christ, and they need to be woven together in our own lives in their proper positioning with one another. The Word of God and its explanation and exhortation to us leading us and directing us to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, to experience Christ in this mystical fashion. To have Him open our eyes not just to see the world differently, but to see Him in the world. This is the ultimate gift that He gives us. That our eyes do not simply see trees and birds and the sun and the moon, but they see Christ in the midst of it all.

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