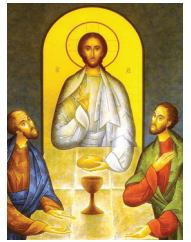


CATECHETICAL SERMON ON THE DIVINE LITURGY

#5 THE SERVICE OF THE WORD: “THE RECOLLECTIONS OF THE APOSTLES . . . ARE READ.”



The simple structure of the reading of the Word of God has changed very little since the most ancient times. Our lectionary is still very similar today to what it was in the 8th century, with one striking difference. The Byzantine rite originally had three readings at the Eucharistic Liturgy: one from the Old Testament, then one from the letters of the New Testament, and finally a reading from the Gospels—all followed by one—or more—homilies. But by the 9th century the Old Testament reading was relegated to Vespers. One gets a glimpse of this today in the vigil Liturgy for the greatest feasts, Pascha, Theophany and Christmas, where there is a continuum of Old and New Testament readings. In Justin Martyr’s description of the Eucharistic Liturgy at Rome c. 150 AD, he says, “The recollections of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us; he urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up and pray.” This “Liturgy of the Word” may be second only to the reception of Holy Communion as being the most intimate part of the service. By partaking in the consecrated Bread and Wine “the two become one flesh;” for Jesus said, “the one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.” (Cf. John 6:57) And by listening to the Scriptures we hear his voice, and Jesus said, “If anyone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will enter and we will dine together.” (Revelations 3:19) The divine statement in Genesis that a man and a woman “become one flesh,” is perhaps a prophetic hint that in receiving Holy Communion our divinization is enhanced by intimate personal contact with the physical body of Christ in this Mystery. By hearing the Word of God contained in the Scriptures, we are challenged by the words of psalm 94/95: 8, repeated in Hebrews 3:7, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as at Meriba (the name means dispute), or like the day at Massah in the desert (the name means testing), where your ancestors tested me.” In refuting the charges of his critics (recorded in John 5:37b-39), Jesus said, “You have neither heard his voice at any time, nor have you seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you because you do not believe the very one he (i.e. the Father) sent.” We cannot listen casually to the Scriptures, as though being amused by a story, but we must search them, digging deeply into their meaning and looking to know Jesus better.

Today our lectionary has a set cycle for the whole year. In general, we begin on Easter Sunday to read the Acts of the Apostles, telling the story of the earliest life of the Church; and to read the Gospel of John, the most mystical and sublime of the four. After Pentecost we begin to read the letters of the apostles, beginning with St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans. We do not read his letters in the order in which he wrote them, but in the order in which they were collected in the Bible, from the longest to the shortest. On those Sundays after Pentecost we read the Gospel of Matthew, and at the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost we begin to read the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of Mark is read during Great Lent. commemorations, such as the All Souls Saturdays. We take vital spiritual nourishment into our souls when we listen carefully to the word of God. Notice what Jesus said in Matthew’s Gospel (4:4), quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 in repudiating Satan’s challenge, “A person does not live on bread alone, but on every word coming from the mouth of God!” Notice, every word!