

Chapter xvii: *Gospel.*

TO RECAP: last week we were about to begin the Gospel procession. The Gospel is the centre and climax of the ministry of the Word, itself the central third of the whole Mass. We were therefore eager to press on to this central climax, and our first freeze-frame this week shows a huge party of people straining to be gone: the deacon holding the book of lections, subdeacon and Master of Ceremonies holding nothing, boat-boy holding incense boat, thurible holding thurifer, crucifer holding processional cross, acolytes holding *candelabra*. They're at the foot of the altar, have all just genuflected, and are about to swivel about and march down the nave.

It's an awkward moment to freeze them, but we do have to pause, and indeed rewind the tape a few frames to observe how the subdeacon got to where he is now. For he has been moving about strangely since, after chanting the Epistle, he surrendered the book of lections and kissed the celebrant's hand. He has been performing an odd motion with the other liturgical book, the Missal: a motion called [flitting](#). And flitting has to be accounted for – for it introduces a whole new axis of significance to the Mass, has indeed marked a modulation in the Mass. The angels who are said to stream out of paradise to witness every Mass must now sing with a new inflection in their eternal Hosannas: *Alleluia alleluia*, they cry to each other, *behold! the subdeacon has flitted the Missal: Hosanna in excelsis!*

East and west, right and left, north and south.

MANY CHAPTERS AGO we discussed the idea of Eastwardness: the worship of the Christian Church is traditionally orientated toward the orient, the east of Jerusalem and the rising Son. The high altar is thus at the east end of a church, and there's an increasing sense of sanctity as we move east toward it. The priest (unless he be a modernised priest who gives himself airs) stands with us, *before* the altar of God, west of it, speaking to God for us and sometimes, turning around, speaking to us for God.

But there's an elaboration to this east-west axis which we need to consider now, because now, for the first time in Mass, it comes into play.

The logistics of Mass have always required a certain amount of movement *along* the altar, to the left and the right. And the feeling has grown up that there's particular

honour due to the right-hand end of the altar, over the left: an obvious preference, since in every culture and context the right hand is favoured over the left. – I don't have the patience to defend this universal human preference against that political correctness which would wail: *Oh how can you be so insensitive? What about poor left-handed people?* We are symmetrical critters, and if we cannot give the fundamental leftness and rightness of our bodily existence a moral dimension, we are simply impoverishing our imagination. The left hand is *sinister* (which literally means left). The deacon is the celebrant's *right-hand* man, while the subdeacon processes on the celebrant's left, because right is better than left and the deacon is superior to, in office hierarchically better than, the subdeacon. I don't care how old-fashioned all this sounds, and I am not going to mention political correctness, the politics of identifying-yourself-by-your-weakness, again. Christianity is incompatible with such humourless clowning. Avaunt.

The right-hand is better than the left; we defer then to the right-hand side of the altar – not our right, but Christ's. For we picture Christ, high and lifted up, His robes filling the Temple, enthroned on the altar, facing us. Indeed He is portrayed above the altar on the crucifix, His dead head slumped to His right in honour of the title inscribed above His Cross. His right is our left, and therefore the north end of the eastward-facing altar has precedence over its south end. – I wonder if I've made this clear.

In any case, grasp that the north corner, the right end (what from our point of view is the *left* end) of the altar is even more honourable than the other corner. The centre of the altar, before the [tabernacle](#) where Christ's Body is kept, is naturally where the climax of Mass, the consecration, takes place; it would be improper to use the centre for the earlier, less extreme portion of Mass; therefore one extremity or other has to be used for that portion; and the Church imaginatively uses both.

Up until the moment when the Epistle is read, the Missal or Mass-book and its stand have been at the south end of the altar. At Low Mass, where the priest does almost everything himself, he actually reads the Epistle at that end; it is therefore known as the [Epistle Corner](#). At Low Mass, he then heaves the Missal and its stand over to the other, more honourable end of the altar, the [Gospel Corner](#), and reads the Gospel from there. This is the movement charmingly known as flitting. Flitting adds motion and drama to the aspect of the altar, awaiting the work of consecration and offering. And flitting marks the increase in the seriousness and splendour of Mass that comes with the reading of the Gospel of Christ. From now on things are to be more glorious than they were before.

Low Mass is not ideal; the celebrant ought not to do everything himself; and at High Mass, the more natural form of the sacrifice, it is the subdeacon who flits. Having surrendered the book of lessons, his job is to move the Missal on its brass stand over to the Gospel side, for even though at High Mass the Gospel will actually be carried down to the people and read in their midst, this is still the moment when we move from Epistle to Gospel, from human reflection on Christ to the words and deeds of Christ. Therefore the Mass-book must move from Epistle Corner to Gospel Corner: of course not in a straight line (that would involve trampling the celebrant) but in a graceful U. The subdeacon bears Missal and stand down to the flat area below the altar – the [pavement](#) – genuflects, and carries it back up to the more sacred north end.

Northernness.

WHILE THE SUBDEACON'S DOING THAT, and while we're savouring the grace of his movement, let's also reflect on this other, rather subtle, reason for making the north end of the altar the Gospel end.

There is an old, odd, quaint, useful image of the geographical North as the realm of Satan – the irascible, cold, brutish, brooding, unapproachable prince of darkness. That made sense in the first millennium, when Mediterranean Catholics peered north into the blizzards of slaving heathenism. It has made sense again for the last five centuries, while the Catholic Mediterranean has peered north into the blizzards of snarling Protestantism (we touched on Luther's stormy, wintry soul last week). The mediæval Church thought of herself as going to the north end of the altar to read the Gospel *against*, in the teeth of, in defiance of, Satan's glacial North. She enjoyed murmuring to herself these verses of Isaiah, enchanting in rhythm, dazzling in movement, almost an incantation:

*How art thou fallen from heaven,
O Lucifer, son of the morning!
how art thou cut down to the ground,
which didst weaken the nations!
For thou hast said in thine heart,
I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God:
I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation,
in the sides of the north.¹*

No one knows for certain what Isaiah meant; indeed, it's quite likely that he was just inveighing against a certain King of Tyre (Tyre being a city a bit north of ancient Israel), identifying him with the morning star, or in other words the planet Venus, which pops into the sky just before sunrise and is thus called *lucifer, light-bearer*. When we start thinking about the Bible it's hard to know where we'll end up. Still, the Bible is the Church's property; she can use it as she sees fit; and in this case she has seen fit to see this doomed, arrogant king as Satan, and to call Satan 'Lucifer', and to picture Satan pitching his throne the North, and to read the Gospel aggressively in that direction – at least at Low Masses. As we're about to see, High Mass subsumes the actual reading of the Gospel from the Missal. At High Mass the Gospel is not read by the celebrant from the Missal, but by the deacon from the lection book, after the procession which we're about to describe. So it's read not against the heathen North, but toward the West – perhaps in the direction of the ranting Creationists of Kansas. Or the Mormons of Utah. Or the Rest of Jesus sect in Wisconsin, which recently began assassinating undertakers, because it disapproves of embalming. Ah, the great American hinterland!

Still, no doubt the subdeacon murmured to himself militantly, as he flitted the Missal to the north end –

*Thou hast said in thine heart,
I will sit upon the sides of the north;
How art thou fallen from heaven,
O Lucifer, son of the morning!*

¹ Isaiah xiv¹²⁻¹³; cf. Luke x¹⁸: *I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.*

Now, having plonked down the Mass-book and its stand heroically in the direction of the winter-dragon, of the Nordic Barbarians and Heretics, he has slipped back down to the deacon's side and become insignificant again. Indeed, the subdeacon is now become a book-stand himself, as we shall see; for now, at last, we lift the pause switch on our freeze-frame and release –

the Gospel procession.

THE EIGHT MEMBERS OF THE GOSPEL PROCESSION turn, with relief, west, and head off down into the middle of the people of God, banner, torches, smoke, damask robes, scarlet book, all marched out into the nave to proclaim the words that cause life.

First come the lights and the cross, and the people stand, bowing profoundly to that ultimate symbol as it passes. Then come the thurifer and his boat-boy and the Master of Ceremonies; next the empty-handed subdeacon, whose *rôle* has yet to be revealed; last of all the deacon, holding the book before his face, closed as always with the edge of the pages facing left (we'll see why this is later). As the book passes, everyone in the congregation turns with it, and when the procession comes to a halt, halfway down the nave, it has drawn every eye in the building, as a magnet draws iron filings.

Once the Gospel party stops, it forms itself into an intense and symmetrical huddle, a formation designed for solemn recitation. The cross, with its accompanying lights, swivels, so that the Christian emblem looks back east toward on the Gospel. The subdeacon swivels too, and the deacon lays the book in his hands, opening it to today's Gospel. The subdeacon takes the book, resting it on his forehead so that he becomes a living book-stand. The deacon stands with his hands folded in prayer.

And all this while the choir has not ceased to hail the approach of the Gospel with song.

The Alleluia, or Tract; Sequences.

AS ALL THIS has been happening – Missal flitted, incense imposed, Gospel party formed up, Gospel procession – there has been music. Just as the Lesson and Epistle were divided and bridged by the chanting of the Gradual, so the Epistle and Gospel are divided and bridged by song.

What song, exactly? Well, it varies with season.

Today, because it's Lent, the choir chants a comparatively sombre affair known as a [Tract](#), an unadorned extract from the Psalms. Today the Proper of the Mass (which means, as you'll remember, the portion that change each Sunday) forms a long, sweet, lyrical cry to God to be generous to us, and merciful.

*The sorrows of my heart are enlarged:
O bring Thou me out of my troubles, O Lord,²*

sighed the Gradual, connecting the story of God's generosity to Abraham with Paul's hazy but ecstatic meditation on that gift. Once Paul finishes, the choir resumes with this cry:

² Psalm xxv¹⁶.

*O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is gracious:
and His mercy endureth forever.*

And the response comes:

*Who can express the noble acts of the Lord
or show forth all His praise?*³

Thus the choir sings in the delicate nocturne of Nicodemus, who murmurs with Christ about the absolute gift of life.

The Tract is sweet enough. But on normal Sundays, outside Lent and Advent, the musical intermission between Epistle and Gospel is something far more exuberant than the Tract: the *versus alleluaticus*, or [Alleluia](#).

Alleluia is one of those Hebrew words, like *Amen* and *Hosanna*, not translated in our liturgy, just as the Greek phrases *Kyrie eleison* and *Christe eleison* aren't translated (although it sometimes gets anglicised as *Hallelujah*). The word means literally *give praise to Jah*, Jah being one of the names by which God was known in Israel; but when Hebrew was forgotten it still had the feel of a cry of ultimate joy. Such ultimate joy was naturally associated with Easter, and for a long time it was only sung in Rome at the Paschal feast, *so that many Romans use this oath: may they hear and sing that hymn, may they live to the next Easter!*⁴ But we are now more generous with ourselves, chanting the Alleluia anthem to welcome the Gospel at every Mass outside Advent and Lent, and using the word a good deal throughout the liturgy after Easter. (The disappearance of the word *Alleluia* at the beginning of this Lent was discussed carefully in our bulletin.)

The Alleluia anthem comes in the form *Alleluia, Alleluia, verse, Alleluia*; the verse is chosen carefully from the Psalms (often) or other writing. In this church, a cantor first sounds the elaborate chant, and then we merrily take it up – but it doesn't happen today, so that is enough about the Alleluia

Everyone likes the Alleluia, and in the merry Middle Ages the Church added embellishments to her Alleluia on most Sundays: a sequel called the [Sequence](#) or the Prose. These anthems or flourishes were effervescent and, they say, not always entirely restrained (but how much does that matter?). In any case with the Renaissance the fashion changed, opinion turned against Sequences, and they were almost all suppressed, forbidden and squashed.

Only five Sequences survived this massacre. We will be hearing one of the five, the Sequence *Victimæ paschali laudes*, a tenth century composition, on Easter Day between the Epistle and Gospel (there's a translation in our hymnal, number 97, if you can't wait until then). And at Requiem Masses the choir still chants a magnificent Sequence called the *Dies Iræ* (bad translation at number 468 in the hymnal, not this one):

*Day of wrath, and doom impending,
David's word with Sibyl's blending,
Heaven and earth in ashes ending.*

*O what fear man's bosom rendeth
When from heaven the Judge descendeth,
On Whose sentence all dependeth!*

³ Psalm cvi¹⁻².

⁴ Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.*, VII, xix.

– and so on. However, today is not a Requiem, nor is it Easter, so we don't have a Sequence, and (not even pausing to enquire who Sibyl was) we reach the end of the Tract (. . . *O visit me with Thy salvation*).

There is a then a dramatic silence for a second; then, at last:

the Gospel.

THE LORD BE WITH YOU! sings the deacon. It's our old friend, the *Dominus vobiscum*; and we sing back the familiar, gracious response: *And with thy spirit*. Then he announces, again 'with note', in a chant: *The continuation of the Holy Gospel according to – Mark or Mathew or Luke or John*, as the case may be (except on the rare occasion when it's the first verses of one of the four, and he announces: *The beginning of . . .*). Note that he announces this lection as the *continuation* of the Gospel: *Sequentia evangelium secundum N.* is what the deacon said in the good old days of Latin. It isn't just the reading of a book which was closed and now for a few moments is open – it is the *continuation* of what has never stopped, and never can: the word of life, the announcement of divinity's presence in human affairs, affairs as human they can be described, as in a novel or a news report.

And therefore the people, still standing, cry out: *Gloria tibi, omine, Glory be to Thee, O Lord*

As he announces the Gospel, the deacon is busily crossing himself – with his right thumb, thrice: over his forehead, over his lips, over his chest: over his mind, that he might read with understanding, over his voice, that he might read decently and well, over his heart, that he might take the words within him and be kindled to love. The people repeat this very ancient three-fold crossing with their thumbs.

And then, before he dare read, the deacon hallows the book with incense: he takes the censer from the thurifer, and shakes it, centre, left, right, over the page.

We are ready now. The immense liturgy of assembling, processing and censuring the Gospel have led up to this moment, when we are about to hear it. All these imposing actions have led *up*. Here is the pinnacle of pronouncing and hearing sacred words. It's hard to think what more could be done to make reading aloud more majestic and solemn.

Ritual could not be less decorative and more practical than this ritual. We have had our imaginations elevated to the level where we might properly hear. We have had our minds opened so that we can see what the Bible is (as we discussed two weeks back) and what the Bible is not (as we discussed the week before).

It is not a secret message from God to the believer, all parts of it equally sacred. The ceremonies of Lesson, Epistle and Gospel have shown how hierarchical it is: Old Testament explained by the New, New Testament orbiting round the life of Christ.

It is not primarily a private book, to be mulled over in solitude. It is a public message from God to the Church. Nothing could express its publicity more than these ceremonies of display and proclamation.

We are ready: the chanting begins.

*Erat autem homo ex Pharisæis Nicodemus nomine . . .
hic venit ad eum nocte*

*There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus:
The same came to Jesus by night*

The thurifer swings the censer back and forth, so that luminous smoke surrounds the chanting deacon; the cross and lights are lowered, so that nothing impedes the sight of him publishing the doings of God on earth.

Apart from the majesty of this moment, perhaps nothing is more striking about it than this careless publicity. What was murmured to Nicodemus in the silent evening is sung out now to whomever feels like turning up in church. The most esoteric truths about God's policies to man are advertised openly. We are no longer God's servants, but His friends, since He lets us shout out His doings like this, discussing them as if we were His colleagues.⁵ Very well, His colleagues: and the formal, solemn Gospel reading is thus the culmination of man's new amazing intimacy with His God.

*Quod dico vobis in tenebris
dicite in lumine
et quod in aure auditis
prædicate super tecta*

*Ne ergo timueritis eos nihil
enim opertum quod non revelabitur
et occultum
quod non sciatur*

*What I tell you in darkness,
that speak ye in light:
and what ye hear in the ear,
that preach ye upon the housetops.*

*for there is nothing covered,
that shall not be revealed;
and hid,
that shall not be known.⁶*

⁵ John xv¹⁵.

⁶ Matthew x^{27, 26}.