

THE BEAUTY OF THE MASS—18

In the **First Reading**, we do what our Jewish brothers and sisters have done for centuries in their own synagogue services. They would open up the Books of the Law and the Prophets and they would read them. We go back to our Jewish roots by listening to an Old Testament reading. This reading helps us remember what God did in the past for our ancestors of faith who did not know the Messiah and who were looking forward to his coming. The First Reading is taken from the Old Testament and it is almost always has a connection or a common theme with the Gospel.

At the end of the First Reading, when the lector proclaims, “*The Word of the Lord*,” we respond with gratitude by saying, “*Thanks be to God*.” Then there is a period of silence to help us reflect on God's Word that we just heard.

The Liturgy of the Word is a dialogue. God speaks to us and we are to respond. Our response to the First Reading is one of the psalms from the Old Testament Book of Psalms. We call this psalm proclamation the **Responsorial Psalm**. In the past, it was called the Gradual because it was led or sung by the cantor who stood on the *gradus* or the step of the lectern.

It was the custom in the Jewish liturgy that their readings would be broken up by the singing or recitation of psalms. This helped avoid monotony while, at the same time, allowing the congregation a real participation in worship. When they gathered in the Temple, the Israelites sang the psalms antiphonally, alternating side to side. We do the same.

The Responsorial Psalm is usually sung.

There are two ways of singing the psalm after the first reading: responsorially or directly. In responsorial singing, which is preferred,

the cantor sings the psalm verse, and the whole congregation joins in by singing the response. In direct singing, there is no response by the community. Either the cantor or choir sing alone as the community listens, or all sing it together.