

When the Lector Does the Psalm

Ideally, the lector who proclaims the first reading at Sunday Mass is followed by a cantor, who leads the singing (and sings the verses) of the responsorial psalm. But, let's face it: Very often (like at the 7:00 AM Mass) the psalm is not sung and the lector is expected to read it. When this is the case, it is important that the lector know how to do antiphonal proclamation.

Antiphonal speech or song is simply a matter of two groups of speakers or singers tossing text back and forth — like a shuttlecock in an easy badminton volley. In the case of the responsorial psalm, the cantor is one team, the assembly the other. The cantor supplies the assembly with a sung refrain which they are to repeat after each verse or strophe of the psalm. When sung (as it regularly should be), the antiphonal structure of the psalm is easy. The melody of the cantor's verses leads into the melody of the assembly's refrain, giving them a clear signal when to do their part.

It is precisely the same, but not quite so easy, for the lector who reads the verses of the responsorial psalm. The "melody" of the rise and fall of the speaking voice has to make clear when the assembly is to speak the refrain. The lector should not have to say the first word of the assembly's refrain in order to bring them in. "But they have the text in front of them," you might say. "They can see when to come in." That may be true in some parishes, but not in all. And they shouldn't *have to* look at the text any more than they should have to follow along in the missalette as the readings are proclaimed. Hearing the word proclaimed is an experience very different from reading it quietly to oneself.

Remember too that a group is proclaiming the psalm. The rhythm and modulation of the lector's part can make it much easier for the group to come in together on the refrain. So successful reading of the responsorial psalm takes some practice and requires an alert sensitivity to the "music" of the spoken word.

First, examine the text. The psalms are songs; they are meant to be sung. But they can also be seen as poems (lyrics) and can be beautifully recited. Clearly, though, the psalms are not prose and demand more than a prosaic rendering. They require a more exalted mode of proclamation than narrative or discourse.

More often than not, the refrain (the assembly's part) is taken from the psalm itself and is an exultant cry or a poignant plea or an energetic exhortation. A few examples: "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord," "Lord, come and save us," "Turn to the Lord in your need, and you will live." Delivered in a low, flat, dull tone of voice, such texts sound ridiculous. The lector's voice must match the text. Nothing exaggerated or theatrical is being encouraged here — liturgy is ritual action, not literal reenactment, so it is always characterized by a degree of restraint and objectivity. But there must be an echo of the spirit of the words in the voice of the lector. (That will help the assembly to do the same.)

Remember what the responsorial psalm does. It embodies our response to the word of God that we have just heard proclaimed in the first reading. In a sense, the psalm extends our "Thanks be to God" into a sustained cry of praise and thanksgiving for the great gift of God's word. But the psalm, too, is scripture. So the proclamation of the psalm is also the proclamation of God's word. How the psalm is sung or read will determine the degree to which it fulfills its purpose. Singing is best, but reading can achieve good results — if the reader does a good job.

The verses or strophes of the psalm are usually made up of four lines of poetry (a quatrain). The lector's voice must proclaim the poetry in these lines intelligently and energetically, and must clearly signal the end of the quatrain with a strong resolution downward. The sound of closure must be obvious so that the assembly hears it coming, knows when the lector is finished and spontaneously proclaims its refrain. Anything less than this degree of clarity will compromise the psalm — and reduce it to a guessing game of "when do we come in?"

The "strong resolution downward" mentioned above could be demonstrated easily by any sensitive speaker. It is not so easy to describe it in writing. But if you are called upon to read the responsorial psalm, think about this task carefully. Experiment a bit and discover how to use your voice to carry the signals necessary for effective antiphonal speech. Above all, remember that you are facilitating the assembly's response to and proclamation of the word of God. Anything less than your best efforts is unthinkable.