

Introduction



In an e-mail to her pastor, a parishioner wrote concerning her four-year-old: “Libby asked yesterday when Jesus was going to come down and see her since he is just up there and not talking! I can’t keep up with her.”

It is the challenge and the joy of those who read in the assembly to dispel this child’s commonly held misconception. Let there be no doubt that at the announcement of the reading, “A reading from . . .,” Jesus comes down. Let there be no doubt that with each reading from the scripture Jesus is talking. We underscore that reality at the conclusion of each reading when we declare this to be “the word of the Lord.”

How shall we rediscover and experience this truth? That is the task of this little handbook for readers.

The frightening and holy truth of the matter is that God deigns to use human beings to vocalize God’s truth. God elects to employ human lips to bring the wonder of God’s word to human hearts. It is an incarnational mystery of

sorts that the wonder of the Word-made-flesh is echoed in human speech. It is perhaps this holy calling with which you as a reader ought first to be confronted.

At the same time, always remember that it is finally the action of the Spirit that makes the miracle of the voiced word a reality. It is as true now as it has ever and always been that “men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:21). Whether the word is being brought to written form or to speech, it is the Spirit who does the moving. Humankind serves as the conduit.

With the daunting nature of the task before us, those wishing to offer themselves to this ministry of reading in the assembly might reasonably next ask, “What are the qualities we seek in readers?” What are the prerequisite gifts?

The first requirement is a “Send me! Send me!” passion for the proclaiming of the word. Where such passion is not already present in an individual, we might also look for a “would that I could” attitude: “I just don’t think I can do it. I wish that I could. I would love to be able to. I am afraid I just can’t.” The art of reading in the assembly can be taught, but the learning process is a rigorous and continuous one.

The second requirement is perhaps a sense of humility. Among many of us who have been reading in church for a good while, there is a self-defeating and almost always deceptive self-confidence afoot that diminishes the importance of the rehearsal of readings, “because I have been doing this for years.” Those who read the scripture aloud during the liturgy have been entrusted with the word in purest form beyond the bread and wine of holy communion. This responsibility begs for a little fear and trembling on the part of even the most experienced reader. One must never lose that original sense of awe and wonder at having been chosen as the spokesperson of the Divine in the hour of prayer.

God is glorified while readers and hearers are edified in our continuing commitment to reading the word as well as we possibly can. The best that we can offer can always be better.

The holy scriptures, the written and proclaimed word of God, never fail to reward those who encounter them. Those who worship in community owe their gratitude to those who give breath to that word—to you.



Only readings that make sense make disciples.

A personal and thorough understanding of the meaning of the text paves the way for effectively sharing the text.

1 Listening: The reader's first task

"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (Luke 11:28)

Listening is the first task of those who wish to read aloud well. Before we can *echo the joyous strain* of the word of God, we must first hear it clearly. This takes time.

We might begin by *reading the assigned text devotionally*. By this I mean sitting quietly with the text. Read it over silently, perhaps several times, within the context of a time of private prayer.

Listen to the words.

Hear the word.

Hear it as spoken directly to you.

Receive the word with thanksgiving.

Ponder the word prayerfully.

Allow the text to work on you before you begin to work on the text.

It is finally impossible to help the assembly to hear what the reader has not first heard.



This is God's word.

This is God's work.

Begin your preparation with prayer.

When the reader's heart, by the power of the Spirit of God, is in the right place, it is then possible to concentrate constructively on putting the word on one's lips.

Sounding out the text

Beyond how the text speaks to the reader in a devotional setting, one needs to consider the variety of sounds within every assigned text. The questions to be asked are the simple ones:

Whose voice are we hearing? Is it the voice of God; the voice of the prophet; the voice of the apostle; the voice

of Jesus; the voice of a character within the story?
Listen carefully.

How does that voice sound? Is it an angry voice; an instructive voice; a consoling voice; a chastising voice; a joking voice; a despairing voice; a rejoicing voice?
Listen carefully.

What are the story's details? What is happening? What will happen? Where is the story going?
Listen carefully.

What is the prophet, the apostle, the Lord, trying to say? Where is the text heading?
Listen carefully.

We might productively label this activity sounding out the text. When little children are stuck on a word in their early days of reading, mothers and fathers for generations have encouraged them to “sound it out.” They are asking the child to discover how the arrangement of the letters ought to sound. This is a legitimate approach to any portion of the holy scripture and one that is well within the capabilities of every thoughtful person.

How one duplicates, mimics, or reproduces the text's sounds is a topic to be considered in the next section of this handbook. For the moment, the first and most critical task of the reader is to listen to the sound of the text.

It is no accident that we ask first, "How does the text sound?" rather than, "What does the text mean?" Discovering the sound of the reading will shed enormous light on its meaning. To hear the unique sounds of the text echoed on the lips of a disciplined reader will serve as oral interpretation for persons listening in worship. In many instances a text well spoken will be readily understood.



Let the word in before
attempting to get the word out.

That this aspect of the ministry of the lector has been often overlooked or undervalued is evident in how often the reading of one lesson has sounded much like the reading of every other. *Dusty, dry, monotonous, biblical!* are some of the adjectives that come too quickly to mind.

Certainly there will be situations in which one must do more to gain an understanding of complicated readings. The reader should never hesitate to seek clarity of understanding. Many church libraries contain a variety of tools such as commentaries, Bible dictionaries, atlases, and the like. Pastors will in almost every instance be eager to share their perspective with readers who ask.

It ought to go without saying that it is impossible to make understood texts that the reader does not understand.