



Bible Readings in Church

Almost anyone could do the readings. Almost anyone could do them badly and/or carelessly. But, with a little effort, most people could do them well. A little thought and a little planning can make all the difference.

Morning Prayer is part of the Church's daily cycle of prayer: an ongoing engagement with God's Word in Scripture and Prayer, whereas the Mass is not just worship solely led by the Priest. It is comprised of two parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Sacrament. In a Mass, both are equally important, as we cannot feed properly from the Blessed Sacrament unless we have been first fed by God's word. The word is God is also incomplete until we have partaken in God's Holy Sacraments; so through reading in Church you are undertaking a vital role in the life and worship of this Church.

If you haven't worked at it, don't expect, miraculously, to do it well. God provides miracles when a problem is beyond human solution. This is not one of those.

First Things First

Clearly, you can't just roll up on Sunday morning, stride to the front and begin reading. So to prepare: You get out your Bible, turn up the first passage and begin reading. Wrong! The first thing you should do is pray. At this stage, pray that you will understand the passages. You cannot read anything well if you do not understand it

Spadework

When you have prayed, read the other passages, including the Gospel. The three year Common Worship Lectionary chooses readings that are thematically linked to the season and ensure that the Liturgy of the Word is based on a common theme. An RCL lectionary can be obtained from any Christian bookshop, and the readings for each

day can be downloaded from the internet into your Computer (see <http://frsimon.wordpress.com/electric-ordo/>) . The readings are distributed to you at least a few weeks in advance before the service. Understanding how your reading fits into the whole will guide you as to how to play this reading.

Dramatise

No one expects an Oscar-winning performance from you, but the most thrilling and momentous passages will seem deadly dull if they are read in a flat monotone. Pray about this, too. Look for any direct speech and work out how it might be said. Is it a question? a command? Should it be said in an angry tone? or a comforting one? Is there a point at which a slight pause would be appropriate, perhaps to let some great truth sink in? If there is no speech you can try to convey the general mood of the passage. Does it record a happy event? or a sad one? Read through again, putting in these effects in your head. Try any difficult words out loud, to make sure you can get your tongue round them. More on this later

Sunday Morning

By now the passages should seem like old friends. Read them through again, either at home or, having arrived at church sufficiently early, sitting quietly in a pew. (Of course, there is a greater danger that you will be interrupted, if you choose the latter.) This reading should also be accompanied by prayer. Pray that you will recall all the mental notes you have made and give thanks that you don't have to do any of this in your own strength. God will calm your nerves too. I once had a friend, a gifted speaker, who told me that she was always very nervous before she began. 'If I stopped being nervous I should stop accepting invitations to speak,' she said, 'because then, I would know that I was doing it in my own strength and not depending on God.'

Practicalities

Except for when you are actually reading, you should be as unobtrusive as possible. Sit at the end of a pew so that you don't have to disturb other people, and in a place where you don't have to walk across the front of the church to get out to the lectern. Unless you have been told otherwise, the readings will be from the Jerusalem Bible, and are printed on the weekly service sheet.

Anticipate. Don't sit in your place until there is a long silence. By the time the priest has finished the Collect you should be standing at the lectern, ready to begin, and by the end of each reading, the next person should be ready to take over almost without a pause. Being ready and in position will give you time for one last 'arrow' prayer for support. Don't worry about the microphone. You don't have to do anything to it. That is not your responsibility. If there is a problem, someone will step in to assist you or make adjustments with the controller or mixing desk. All you need to do is speak clearly and loudly, as the microphone is there to support your voice, not replace it. You don't need to lean towards the microphone or touch it. At the front of Church people will be listening primarily to you and not the speakers. You need to speak loudly enough to be clearly heard over half the Church.

This is It

The service sheet indicates how the reading should be introduced in italics at the top. It usually takes the form “A reading from the Book of X” or “A reading from the letter of Paul to Y”. You should not read out the reference which sounds disjointed: the reading is in front of everyone so there is no scrabbling for it in a pew bible.

There should be a slight pause before beginning the text. Give expression to your reading and make use of full stops, commas and speech marks to make the reading varied and interesting. Although there is no place for silly voices in a Scriptural Reading, one should be able to differentiate in texture between the narrative of the text and the spoken word. Remember that sometimes a dramatic pause can make all the difference to a reading, particularly after a key phrase.

At the end of the reading, again make a slight pause and say, ‘This is the word of the Lord’. The congregation will respond, ‘Thanks be to God’.

Responsorial Psalms when read in the Mass should introduce the response: “The response to the Psalm is...” followed by a short pause and then repeat the response itself, where the congregation will join in with you. You need to boldly repeat the response during the Responsorial Psalm so that the congregation knows to follow with you. Sometimes they do not have the words in front of them so they are relying on you to lead them, and it might not sink in first time. Say the Psalm versicles in the same manner as a normal poetic reading, and repeat again boldly with the congregation the response to the Psalm.

If you are leading the Psalm in morning prayer, you announce the Psalm with either the traditional “The Psalm appointed for today: Psalm X” or more informally “Psalm X”. The separate sheet with the Psalm on it will be laid out for congregational reading. The Odd-numbered lines are your lines, the even-numbered lines are in bold and are for the congregation to respond. You will note that there is a diamond or an asterisk half way through the line. **You should pause at that point for a moment** (perhaps a count of 2) before the rest of the line. Even if the congregation ploughs on with their responses, we must gradually and gently teach the congregation to say the Psalm slowly and reflectively together, listening to each other. You will be able to model that for the Congregation. If the congregation is slow or reluctant to say their lines, lead them in saying the even-numbered verses as well. At the end of the Psalm for morning prayer we all say together the “Glory Be”.

At the end of each reading or Psalm there should be a momentary pause if you are continuing. If someone else is taking over from you, step away as the congregation makes their last response enabling the next reader to pick up with only a momentary pause. There should be a distinct gap between readings but not a long embarrassed silence. When you are back in your place don’t forget to thank God for His help. Now you can relax and enjoy the rest of the service.

Those Awful Hebrew Names

Most people don't have a problem with New Testament names. It's the unusual ones in the Old Testament which are difficult. Here are one or two pointers which may help. Since the Hebrew alphabet is totally different from ours, the letters are already transliterated so that the consonants can be treated just like English. These are not exactly right, but near enough. The problem with the vowels (a,e,i,o,u.) is that, in English, we make one letter represent a number of different sounds. The letter 'a' for example, can be interpreted in eight different ways. This doesn't happen in other languages. Few of them have so many vocals and, in any case, the use of accents, or diacritics makes the pronunciation clear. Hebrew has very few vowel sounds. As a rule of thumb, except for familiar anglicised names, if you always pronounce a as in 'pat', e as in 'egg', i as in 'chick', o as in 'note' u as in 'rule' you'll be about right. Double a as in 'Baal' is said as a long 'a' sound - 'Baaaaal'. If you encounter a word which leaves you totally stuck, check with one of the Clergy or Readers.

The most important advice with difficult names or words is to do something and to do it with confidence. Even if the word is wrong to the ears of Hebrew scholars, we won't notice unless you draw attention to it. So, when confronted with a difficult word, say it how you have worked it out and don't look back. **Never stop and apologise.** God doesn't mind and nor should we.

Summary

To help you remember all of this, here are five 'P's;

- **Pray** First and last
- **Prepare** Thoughtfully
- **Practice** Thoroughly
- **Position** In good time
- **Pronounce** Clearly

I hope you will enjoy reading the Holy Scriptures in Church. Your contribution is appreciated and valued.



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