

Proclaiming the Scriptures

Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, that we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands; the word, who is life, this is our subject'. (1 John 1:1)

In every service of worship, a passage from the Bible is read aloud. This is more than *reading* Scripture, it is a proclamation of the Word of God. The Christian community has always regarded the Bible as a living text, a means through which God speaks to us today, just as God has spoken to Christians through the Scriptures in every generation.

When the Scriptures are proclaimed in public worship, we are both listening to the Word of God for today and forming the community around the eternal truths which we learn through Scripture. The Bible is a radical, transformative, life-giving text; and yet it is sometimes read as though it had no more significance than the words in a phone book.

The purpose of proclaiming the living Word of God in the midst of the People of God is to:

- Help others encounter the life-giving presence of Jesus who is the Word
- Foster an environment of active and expectant *listeners* and *proclaimers* who listen with the ear and the heart
- Proclaim the scriptures as the telling of God's story and our story
- Present the scriptures as a record of God's creative and transforming power
- Enable the hearers to respond in ways which share in the bringing-in of God's kingdom
- Communicate an experience, not a bundle of words

Proclaiming the Scripture is a central part of Christian worship. It is an active and God-given ministry the effectiveness of which rests on the presentation of **appropriate attitudes** and **necessary skills**. It is not an incidental activity.

Worship has an element of performance to it, but this is not a shallow or superficial thing. At the most profound level, performing words implies that they have the power to bring something into being. Words don't just passively describe an existing reality, but bring the reality they are describing into being. The most extraordinary example of this is creation – "God said 'let there be light' and there was light." When we perform the living words of scripture, in a much smaller way we are building the kingdom of God; we are speaking words that become the reality of the Christian community.

This is the level of seriousness with which we might take the reading of Scripture in gathered worship. The appropriate attitude starts with the belief that these words *matter*. The reading of Scripture also requires:

- The sense that the reader believes and is engaged with what is being read as living text
- Dignity, reverence and privilege
- Sincerity and humility
- Confidence in being oneself in presenting the readings
- Recognising the role of reader as being part of the dialogue between God and God's people

There are particular practical skills, which enable the Word of God to be proclaimed in this way. The Word is, of course, powerful beyond what we do with it, how we read it, and how attentively we listen. Ultimately we trust in the Holy Spirit to plant the living word of God in the hearts of God's people. However, this does not mean that we should not also give of our best and do all we can to proclaim the word of God to our community in the most appropriate way we can.

The practical skills, all of which can be learned, include:

- Confidence in the natural use of the voice, movements, postures etc
- Breath control and its application to volume, voice production and the phrasing of a text
- Communication through posture and dress
- Understanding the effect and use of pauses (initial – dividing – stress), varying speeds and pitches, intensity
- Appropriate use of emphasis
- Eye contact (not one-to-one) – beginning-during-end of readings
- Use of microphone
- Pronunciation
- Identifying the genre of the text and presenting it accordingly (story, prophecy, poetry, lamentation, etc)
- Appropriately contextualising the reading at the beginning
- Identifying the 'punch line' in the general narrative of the text

- Attending to the ending of the reading
- Familiarity with the place of the reading / lectern etc

Many of these practical skills are a matter of practice, confidence and preparation. Next time you hear somebody read aloud from the Scriptures, listen analytically (not critically!). Which of these skills are evident? How are they used? Which skills would have helped?

The Revised Common Lectionary

The bigger picture of the proclamation of the Scriptures in public worship is the pattern of reading from week to week. Many of the mainstream churches follow the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). This is a rota of readings that works through the Bible in a three year cycle. During each year one Gospel is focussed on: – A Matthew, B Mark and C Luke. The Gospel of John is interspersed into each year, and Old Testament and other New Testament readings are matched to the Gospel passage. It was released in 1994 and is used across denominations.

Knowing what readings were heard last week, and the week before, may help to put into context the reading of the day and allow some continuity from week to week.

Not all parishes follow the RCL. Many parishes will sometimes use the RCL, but not always. Another way of proclaiming the Word of God in public worship is by working through a particular book. This is sometimes called a sermon series, and again, it is useful to know if the reading falls within this as it may affect the way in which you introduce and read the passage.

So What?

To get into the swing of thinking about how you might prepare to read a text in public worship, you may want to answer the questions below for some, or all, of the following passages:

1. Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15
2. Luke 16: 19-31
3. Book of Jonah 3:1-5,10
4. Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14

1. What is the genre of the text?
2. What problems are there in communicating it to the listener?
3. What is the point or central idea that might be communicated and what are the key words and phrases which convey this?
4. What might be an appropriate introduction?
5. How might the text be prepared with an awareness of the use of dynamics (tone, mood, speed, pause etc)?
6. What other presentations does the text lend itself to?

Some reflections on the suggested passages:

1. Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15

Exodus is one of the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible, sometimes known as the books of Moses, or the Pentateuch. The story is a very important one for the identity of the people of Israel as God's chosen people. The passage is quite complex, and definitely requires a knowledge of what has already happened to make sense – namely the incredible lengths the Jews went to, to escape from Egypt. Now they are saying they would be better off dead than free! As it helps to make sense of the text, an appropriate introduction might recap what has happened previously to the people of Israel.

Various things could be identified as key themes here, including God's provision to the people of Israel and faithfulness to them even in the face of rebellion. This is quite a dramatic passage, which moves from moaning and wishing to be dead because of hunger and loss of faith, to the abundance of God's extraordinary provision of food for the hungry people

2. Luke 16: 19-31

There is some debate as to whether the story of the rich man (sometimes called Dives) and Lazarus is a parable or not. The story comes as part of a section of Jesus' teaching and is only found in the Gospel of Luke.

Some commentators 'spiritualise' the story, but in its context in Luke's Gospel, it makes most sense to understand it as being about actual (rather than spiritual)

wealth and poverty. This is a very hard hitting story, and thus can be one which we try and soften or explain away.

3. Jonah 3:1-5,10

The book of Jonah tells the story of a prophet, who brought the faithless people back to God. There may be material in this book that is intended to be illustrative, rather than factual, this can create a communication challenge! It helps us to know what kind of story we are hearing to know where to look for the truth it reveals. (We listen in a different way when somebody reads from the days newspaper, to when they read a fairy story). A useful question can be, 'what are the truths that are being shared through this passage' and to think out about how they can emphasised and drawn out through the way it is read.

This passage is in many ways celebratory, but it also includes God appearing to change His mind. Out of context, God might come across in this passage as petty and fickle, only sparing the people a calamity because enough of them have turned back to Him. This may seem different when seen as part of the overall story of God and Israel, in which God provides an environment for the people to flourish and to remain in relationship with God – when they fall away from God, God brings changes to their environment which invite the people to turn back.

4. Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14

The Revelation of St John is a really difficult book to read a passage of and make sense of it! The whole book recounts John's vision and is written in apocalyptic language – in other words it tells the story of the end of the world. This type of language is not intended to be understood literally, but is heavy with symbolism and metaphor. Revelation is a challenge to us today, because we cannot know what the metaphors mean in the way that the first hearers would have understood.

The description of 144 thousand being saved has been interpreted in very many ways by different traditions. Jehovah's Witnesses believe this to be the literal number of people in heaven. Given the nature of the book, this is not a literal prediction, but represents something about the nature of God's fulfilment of the world. This passage also contains the rather bizarre statement that the angels have been "washed in the blood of the lamb". Phrases like this which are used frequently in some Christian traditions are very difficult to communicate to those who do not know the story of Christianity and the symbolism of the Old and New Testaments.

Follow up...

Some passages are difficult to get the gist of – especially if you just look at the verses allocated for that service. There are many commentaries available on the books of the Bible. If you are not familiar with commentaries, a good place to start for the New Testament might be **Tom Wright's *For Everyone*** series.

There are various resources based around the lectionary that can help provide context and draw out meaning for the passages.

Roger Van Harn (ed) *Commentary on the Lectionary Vols 1, 2 and 3* (2001) Continuum

Vol. 1 covers the Old Testament readings, vol. 2 Acts and the Epistles and vol. 3 the Gospels. The articles are written by a wide range of contributors, and provide some discussion about the meaning of the passage, key themes and difficulties.

Roger Van Harn and Brent A Strawn (eds) *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary* (2009) Eerdmans

A similar style commentary focussing on the Psalms.

James Woodward, Paula Gooder and Mark Pryce *Journeying With Matthew: Lectionary Year A* (2013) SPCK

James Woodward, Paula Gooder and Mark Pryce *Journeying With Mark: Lectionary Year B* (2011) SPCK

James Woodward, Paula Gooder and Mark Pryce *Journeying With Luke: Lectionary Year C* (2012) SPCK

A very accessible series of commentaries focussing on the Gospel for each lectionary year.

Lesley Houlden and John Rogerson (eds) *Common Worship Lectionary: A Scripture Commentary Year A* (2001) SPCK

Lesley Houlden and John Rogerson (eds) *Common Worship Lectionary: A Scripture Commentary Year B* (2002) SPCK

Lesley Houlden and John Rogerson (eds) *Common Worship Lectionary: A Scripture Commentary Year C* (2003) SPCK

These three books are intended to provide scholarly background and discussion of the texts. The sections for each passage are quite brief and it focuses on some key points from each reading.

Tom Wright *Twelve Months of Sundays: Years A, B and C* (2012) SPCK

This is based on Wright's columns from the Church Times, and is an accessible resource to the readings for Sundays and major festivals.

Jane Williams *Lectionary Reflections: Years A, B and C* (2011) SPCK

In this book, the three readings for the day are taken together and a reflection and discussion is offered.