

Readers' Formation

A MODEL FOR PREPARATION

*'May the Lord be in my heart and on my lips,
that I may worthily proclaim God's holy Word'*

Begin five or six days before you are rostered to read.



1. Make some time to be quiet in a quiet place

- Become aware of God's presence
- 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.'

2. Read the scriptural texts for the Sunday

- Read them in the following order:
Gospel, First Reading, Responsorial Psalm, Second Reading.
- Read them aloud.
- Read slowly. Stop from time-to-time to let the Word make its impact on you.
- Jot down any words, phrases, images that jump out at you, or any emotions or memories that occur to you.

3. Enter into dialogue with the Word

- What is the Good News here?
- What is the doubt, sin, pain in my life that this passage touches?
- To what change or conversion does it call me?
- What difference will it make in my life or in our world if I took it seriously?

4. Locate the passage in its context

- Look up where the passage is in the Bible. Read sections before and after.
- What experience or question is the author addressing or reacting to?
- What situation prompted this writing?
- Consider how the reading relates to the liturgical season or feast.

5. Identify what sort of writing it is

- Is it a story? (Almost half the bible is narrative)
- Is it a letter?
- Is it poetic writing?
- What human experience is the story addressing?
- What are the key images?
- Why was the letter written? What sort of letter is it?

6. Check your pronunciation

- See the pronunciation guide.

7. Read it aloud

- Read to someone else and ask for feedback.
- Reading in front of a mirror sometimes helps.

8. Practise in the church with the microphone

- Speak to be heard in the fifth row. Speak 5cm from the microphone.
- Perhaps not every time, *but sometimes!*

THE WORD OF GOD

God's Word CREATES

*And God said, 'Let there be...'
and there was. (Genesis 1)*

God speaks – it is!

*God speaks: the heavens are made;
God breathes: the stars shine.
(Psalm 33:6)*

God speaks, calls by name, and a crowd of despairing exiles once again becomes God's people.

*I have called you by name:
you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)*

God's Word is EFFECTIVE

'Yes, as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.' (Isaiah 55:10-11)

God's Word ENDURES

While everything else has its season and turns to dust, God's word is forever.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God remains for ever. (Isaiah 40:7-8)

God's Word

WEARS MANY FACES

- the face of the prophet, from the refined Isaiah to the bizarre Ezekiel
- the face of the lawgiver of Leviticus and Deuteronomy
- the face of the wise person of Sirach and Wisdom
- the face of the passionate poet in the Song of Songs and the Psalms
- the face of the visionary of the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation
- the face of the pastoral letter-writer in Paul.

God communicates,
not by putting thoughts in heads or whispering into ears,
but by *doing significant things in human lives.*

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Bible is a kind of diary—a diary of the family of Abraham, the diary of God’s chosen family. It records the family’s struggle over a dozen or more centuries to make sense of life and to understand how God acts in the family history. Since we have become part of this family by baptism into Christ it is also our family diary. Its records help us make sense of our own lives.

Where it started

This diary took shape around campfires. God called Abraham to leave his settled existence and to become a nomad—to go walk-about. Through the ‘walk-about’ Abraham developed a strong bond with Yahweh and a strong sense of their destiny as a family. This strong sense of destiny was passed on to his descendants. It became the rallying point for the families, clans and tribes that descended from Abraham. God was close to them; they were God’s special people.

The diary of his family—the Bible—records the special times and the special people God raised up for these special times. During their slavery in Egypt, for example, Moses was chosen to lead the people to freedom, only to endure a purification of forty years wandering in the desert. The books of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy are the diary of this experience. They came to know God better through this pivotal experience. (Later Jesus would spend forty days in the desert and get to know his Father better also.)

The Story is Written

Between 1200 and 1000 BCE various tribes moved into Palestine and under David and Solomon grew into a unified and strong family. They continued to tell stories of the key people of their family—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses. The stories were picturesque and engaging. They explained how the world came to be, what God was like, the special care God had for them and what God expected of them in return. They prayed to their God and recorded their prayers. Gradually the diary developed, and a body of laws, customs, theology and history grew. It was in the settled and cultured court of King Solomon that much of this material was organised into ‘books’. The first scrolls of the Hebrew Bible began to take shape. Organised into the first book (Genesis) were stories of how the world came to be, of how humanity came to fall from God and the call of Abram. There were old legends, anecdotes, poems and laws all gathered together to fit into an historical or theological order. In this way the diary of the family was preserved for future generations of the family.

The Story Grows

From 1000 BCE until the destruction of Jerusalem in 587, prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea offered their own insights into the meaning of their present trials. Other reformers and minority voices added to the tradition in the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. At the fall of

Jerusalem, when the nation was carried away to Babylon in captivity, these writings sustained them with hope. The experience also generated a whole new body of tradition and writings. Other parts of the story were reshaped. Religious poetry and prophecy flourished in this time of adversity.

The Story of Jesus

By the time Jesus was born into this family it had a rich tradition of sacred writings. Jesus used these in his teaching. As was the custom in this family, the disciples of Jesus recorded his sayings, developed stories about him and wrote letters explaining his mission. They showed how God acted in a special way in the family history through Jesus: the New Testament was born. As brothers and sisters of Christ, baptised into Jesus' death and resurrection, we have become part of this family and the Bible is our story.

Living Memory

This way of looking at the Bible shows that it is a collection of thousands of pieces, organised into a particular format at various times and places. For example, the first few pages of Genesis contain two separate stories of the origin of the world and humankind. They are quite different. Originally they stood on their own; then they were organised into their present position. The same is true of the legends of Abraham. Different stories with

different messages grew up about him, and grew in the telling. Then they were collected into the book of Genesis.

This is also true of the gospels. Many stories about Jesus were told when the early Christian gathered. Later, some of these were collected and organised as our gospels. The early Christian community worked over and embellished what Jesus said and did to edify catechumens and support their faith. They passed on their spiritual experience of Jesus. The story of the cure of the blind man, for example, was not intended merely to teach that Jesus once worked a miracle. It was told to assure everyone that Jesus could cure their blindness and give them sight and insight.

The Scriptures are the written memory of the Church – the written record of and reflection on the acts of God in human history. We keep on telling these old stories because we need to remember. Remembering the past is the key to understanding the present. The Scriptures are read *as the memory that makes the present intelligible*, to help us understand our own lives and how God is revealed in our world. By recalling God's relationship with people in the past, and especially God's presence in the person of Jesus, we know what kind of God we believe in.

The ending of every reading is: **The Word of the Lord.**
*Even though the current lectionary says, "This is the word" always say **The Word!***

DIFFERENT KINDS OF WRITING IN THE BIBLE

Find out more by visiting bibleproject.com – an excellent website with great resources. A few examples of different kinds of writing in the Bible.

Prophetic Vision

‘The wolf lives with the lamb, the panther lies down with the kid, calf and lion cub feed together with a little boy to lead them. The cow and the bear make friends, their young lie down together’. (*Isaiah 11*)

Personal Testimony

‘All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. That is the way I can hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead. Not that I have become perfect yet: I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me’. (*Philippians 3*)

Story

‘When Pentecost day came around, the apostles had all met in one room, when suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting; and something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them’.
(Acts 1)

Proverbs

‘Leave your folly and you will live’.
(*Proverbs 9*)

Prayer

‘How rich are the depths of God... Who could ever know the mind of the Lord?... Who could ever give God anything or lend him anything? All that exists comes from God; all is by him and for him. To God be glory for ever! Amen.’ (*Romans 11*)

Poetry

‘Who pent up the sea behind closed doors when it leapt tumultuous out of the womb, when I wrapped it in a robe of mist and made black clouds its swaddling bands; when I marked the bounds it was not to cross and made it fast with a bolted gate’?
(*Job 3*)

Laws

‘The Lord says this: “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy as the Lord your God has commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath for the Lord your God. You shall do no work that day...”’
(*Deuteronomy 5*)

History

‘So all the elders of Israel came to the king of Hebron, and King David made a pact with them at Hebron in the presence of the Lord, and they anointed David king of Israel’. (*Samuel 5*)

The role of the reader is to take God’s word to the ears of the world.
Sit quietly with our text *and* watch *and* wonder *and* imagine.

THE WORD OF GOD IN CHURCH DOCUMENTS

‘The Church has always venerated the Divine Scriptures just as she venerates the Body of the Lord’. (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 21)

‘In the readings, which are interpreted by the homily, God speaks to his people, reveals to them the mysteries of redemption and salvation, and provides them with spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself, in the form of his word, is present in the midst of the faithful’. (*General Instruction on the Roman Missal* [GIRM] 33)

‘Indeed, when the Scriptures are proclaimed in the assembly, Christ is present in the word since it is he himself who speaks through them’. (Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7)

‘The word constantly proclaimed in the liturgy is always a living, active word through the power of the Holy Spirit. It expresses the Father’s love that never fails in its effectiveness towards us’. (*General Instruction on the Lectionary* [GIL], 4)

‘The working of the Holy Spirit is needed if the word of God is to make what we hear outwardly have its effect inwardly... The working of the Holy Spirit precedes, accompanies, and brings to completion the whole celebration of the liturgy. But the Spirit also brings home to each person individually everything that in the proclamation of the word of God is spoken for the good of the whole assembly of the faithful’. (*General Instruction on the Lectionary* [GIL], 9)

‘The preaching of the word is necessary for the sacramental ministry. For the sacraments are sacraments of faith and faith has its origin and sustenance in the word. The Church is nourished spiritually at the table of God’s word and at the table of the eucharist. From the one it grows in wisdom and from the other in holiness. In the word of God the divine covenant is announced; in the eucharist the new and everlasting covenant is renewed. The spoken word of God brings to mind the history of salvation; the eucharist embodies it in the sacramental signs of the liturgy’. (GIL 10)

ARRANGEMENT OF THE LECTIONARY

The Lectionary takes sections from the Bible and puts them together as the Sunday readings. It is helpful to know how these passages were selected. The Lectionary is arranged according to two principles:

- **Consecutive** (semi-continuous) reading of one of three ‘synoptic’ Gospels (Matthew, Mark or Luke) used during the period of Ordinary Time.
- **Harmonised** reading where the passages are chosen on the basis of a certain unity of theme used during Lent, Easter, Advent, Christmas, for Saints and on special celebrations. The Gospel of John is usually read during these seasons.

CONSECUTIVE READING (*semi-continuous reading*)

Readings are arranged in a three-year cycle called A, B, C during the Season of the Year.

The Gospel

- The Gospel of Matthew is read in Year A.
- The Gospel of Mark is read in Year B.
- The Gospel of Luke is read in Year C.

Selections are chosen, not because they have a definite 'theme', but because they are manageable slabs of about ten verses that follow one after the other in a semi-continuous way.

First Reading

The first reading is almost always taken from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). It is chosen to harmonise with the Gospel. This does not mean that they have to have the same 'theme'. The harmonisation is often much subtler.

Second Reading

The second reading comes from one of the New Testament letters (epistles). It has no relationship to either the first reading or the Gospel. It is a semi-continuous reading from the same epistle over several Sundays.

HARMONISED READING

Harmonised readings occur during the key liturgical seasons. Harmonisation means that all three readings are chosen to fit in with the character of the season or the celebration.

The first Sunday of Lent in Year A is a good example:

The Gospel

In *Matthew* 4:1-11 Jesus withdraws to be alone with his God. He is tempted but does not concede. He undoes the fall of Adam and Eve.

First Reading

During Lent various topics of instruction for the catechumens and the assembly are proposed from the Old Testament; they are related to the Gospel. The reading for this Sunday is *Genesis* 2:7-9; 3:1-7, the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

Second Reading

During Lent the second readings are teachings addressed to the catechumens and the assembly. Here it is *Romans* 5:12-19 in which Paul draws a contrast between Adam and Jesus: Adam/death; Jesus/life.

READING SKILLS – TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Understanding the mechanics of voice communication and the skills of public speaking are essential for effective proclamation of the word. Some of the key areas are briefly described here.

Eye Contact

Good communication involves looking at those to whom you are speaking. Eye contact can help establish personal engagement with the assembly. Maintaining eye contact is easier if readings have been practiced well beforehand.

Use of Microphone

Readers need to be familiar with the amplification systems they use – how to adjust the microphone, how to turn it on and off, how close to stand etc. Even with a microphone, a whisper will still come across as a whisper. The mic simply amplifies what the speaker says – it doesn't replace the need for good voice projection and clear speech.

Pace (*momentum*)

One of the most common complaints about ministers of the word is that they read too quickly. Listeners generally do not have the text and so need time to hear the words and assimilate what is being said. Slowing down the rate of speech is especially important where there is an echo in the church.

Pace is related to meaning. The more solemn, serious and thoughtful passages will almost inevitably be rendered at a somewhat slower pace. The joyful, exhilarating and triumphant will be read more quickly.

A passage should never be read at the same pace throughout. Varying the pace helps convey the sense and maintain the interest of listeners.

Stress (*highlighting key words*)

Within a text certain words are more significant or predominant than others, carrying the inherent message or central idea, while others are structural, upholding and maintaining the grammatical sense.

Key words tend to be, firstly, nouns and verbs, then adjectives and adverbs. Much less frequently, prepositions and pronouns can be main words.

Structural words, such as 'a' and 'the' should not be lost nor entirely glossed over but should be clearly and neutrally spoken. Such neutralisation helps to contribute to the rhythmic, natural flow of speech.

Pitch (*the music of speech*)

Pitch variety is essential in making reading compelling. Readers should try to become aware of their own resources and levels of pitch and be able to use them to give power and interest.

Particularly, they need to find their middle, comfortable level and to be able to move up and down from it. It is the range that is important, not just one note but the whole series of 'notes' constituting a level or range.

Beginning a reading somewhere in the middle level is very helpful, both to listener and reader. Beginning on somewhat high levels can often lead to strained and unnatural notes which bother everyone.

As a general guide, the decision about pitch follows a somewhat similar pattern to pace. Lower notes and levels are more appropriate for sad, reverential or 'pontificating' passages, or even for rather fierce expressions of feelings.

Middle level carries main lines of narration (unless a specific mood or atmosphere is being created) while the upper levels of pitch can be used for thrilling expressions, especially of joyousness, splendour or exaltation.

Notes shift and change within each level. What should be avoided is too much use of the one level, too much return to the same level, any sense of strain or of 'trying too hard'.

Inflection (*voice glides*)

Another aspect of pitch is the use of varied inflections. Our voices move up and down in glides on words or phrases in response to meaning and mood.

Downward-falling glides or inflections suggest emphasis, completion of thought and determination. Upward-flowing inflections suggest that more is yet to be said, that ideas are tentative or in sequence, that indecisiveness is part of the message.

At times the voice can be 'curled' or moved interestingly through a series of tiny rises and falls together on the one word or throughout one phrase,

especially in conveying the subtlety of irony or some kind of sarcasm.

Pause (*more than silence*)

A pause is not merely a temporary stop, a dead moment of silence, but should catch the attention of listeners or make them aware of something the reader wishes them to note. The duration of the pause can give it different degrees of importance and impact. The placement and number of pauses employed can help in determining the rhythmic flow of language and can assist in clarifying ideas.

Punctuation can help in determining pause but it is not the absolute or complete arbiter. More important is the sense of what the reader wishes to convey. When we speak or read, we seldom do so in single words. Rather, we tend to group words in sense phrases. These are groups of words which convey one single idea. Pausing between phrases helps convey the meaning of the passage.

Pausing before you begin to read is also an effective way of getting the assembly's attention.

Volume (*light and shade*)

Volume, likewise, is an element of the voice which can be used to render what we speak more immediate and compelling to our listeners.

Generally, volume needs to be suited to the size, location and physical quality of an environment, to the number and placement of listeners and to the focus of ideas and the mood of what is read. Quiet tones are often highly effective in

registering key points of a reading, in suggesting delicacy and in conveying impact. They need to be clear and incisive as well as subdued. Energy must be behind them – quietness should never be dull or listless.

Loud volume requires control. It should never become shouting or mere noise – and yet it does have its part in moving listeners. Again, volume will not be uniformly used throughout; it should be used in contrast, that is, loudness followed by softness or vice-versa as pictures change, as emotions ebb and flow.

Tone (*colour, sensitivity to mood*)

Tone of voice is closely linked to emotional response. The very same words, spoken with different intention, take on a different timbre, quality, tone. This is a most subtle element of voice which is not always fully appreciated or

understood or used as an instrument to evoke response.

Articulation (*speaking clearly*)

Articulation or enunciation is the formation of sounds using the tongue, teeth, lips, soft palate and facial muscles. Lazy articulation can muffle sound and make words difficult to understand.

Exaggerated articulation attracts attention to itself and away from what is being read. As always, it is a matter of balance.

Projection (*speaking up*)

Making oneself heard requires both good volume and voice projection. The latter is achieved through clear articulation, breath control and good posture. Speaking to the last row of the church will ensure that speakers lift their heads and project their voices effectively.

TROUBLE SHOOTING FOR READERS

Reading Poetry

Quite a lot of the Bible (about 33%) is written poetically – either in lines of verse-form or in prose of a poetic nature. Poetry tends to present ideas of a more exalted, intense, uplifting, or transcendental kind. Certain aspects of writing can be frequently seen in poetic passages: the language often uses images; it is often full of suggestion and association; it may employ much repetition. It nearly always goes beyond the merely straightforward or ordinary selection of vocabulary; it may build up impression after impression to a powerful climax of delight or horror.

Such writing demands imaginative, thoughtful, emotional reaction and this is reflected in the tone employed. It asks for a sense of timing in speaking lines of verse and especially of the sustaining of thought on the end of a line by a holding on to the final syllable or the whole word itself when the thought is carried through to the next line.

Timing and pace can also reflect the sober or sombre mood, quick tempestuous excitement, or the painful agonising of some words.

The appreciation of certain images can be achieved through considered choice of pitch levels and use of inflections. The ability to use the voice to mirror intensification and movement to climax is most important; the opposite technique is equally important: moving away from a high point to a more relaxed level by gradual softening and slowing.

Reading Long Sentences

At times quite lengthy sentences are found in biblical readings and they must be managed without undue jerkiness of presentation or any sense of unnecessary galloping.

Two difficulties confront the reader, one technical and the other, artistic.

- The technical problem is the management of the breath and the use of phrasing to maintain continuity of thought.
- The artistic problem is that of ensuring that while one deals with a technical difficulty one does not lose the sense of imaginative involvement in what is read.

For some readers with excellent lung capacity and easy control, there will only need to be the awareness of the need for a larger breath intake, for eye-grasp of the phrase and sense of keeping the voice sustained through the use of upward inflection and vital use of modulation – especially of pitch and tone – through to the ending. In particularly long sentences, even strong readers may need to look for division of the passage into a number of sub-groups which can maintain thought without losing any impetus that may need to be sustained throughout.

Faults which could detract from the ease and sustaining of long, involved sentences would be:

- too many pauses breaking and interrupting the sequence
- too many falling inflections which, similarly, would break the passage too much
- maintenance of the voice too consistently on one level of pitch or of pacing so that a certain dullness develops, not at all in keeping with the serious purpose of the words
- lack of ‘shading’, of emphasising of key words and phrases, or of highlighting sharp contrasts in the ideas so that the whole passage settles into one rather even pattern
- failure to diminish words or phrases which are of much less significance in the overall content.

In approaching long sentences, then, prepare carefully, taking time over the preparation.

- Read through the passage a number of times, checking that you have understood the main ideas being developed.
- Decide what is the mood and feeling. On what basis are you making the decision? Are there words or phrases which help you to this understanding?
- Practice reading the passage trying out phrasing, stressing, pause, vocal range and dynamics.
- Try several different ways. Mark the passage, if you think this may be helpful.
- Ask someone to listen to your reading. Let them give you their sense of what you have conveyed.

Repetition

Words, phrases, sometimes lines (as in verse) can be repeated. When repetition occurs, a reader needs to consider what is being achieved by its use and placement in the writing, and from that, to make some decision as to how to interpret it vocally.

Repetition can be used for emphasis, for development of an idea, for amplification, building up greater response, for reinforcing of some thought or feeling.

Ordinarily, when words are repeated, especially in close proximity to each other, readers will need to employ a technique of subordinating i. e. modifying what has already been stressed or highlighted. By shifting the stress to other words, by glossing over the word or phrase in some way through the pitch or pace employed, they will modify its impact on the ear of the listener.

Repetition occurs quite substantially in biblical reading. Consider, for example, the valley of dry bones, *Ezekiel 37: 1-14*, a most wonderfully evocative passage in which the image of dry bones taking on flesh and life again is used to encourage the exiles in Babylon with realisation that God forgives them and will return them to Israel.

Here a number of words and phrases are repeated – ‘bones’, ‘thus says the Lord God’, ‘graves’. Readers will notice that in the first six verses the word ‘bones’ is repeated five times, but on the whole, the words are not in absolutely close proximity and therefore could probably be emphasised each time. However, when God urges Ezekiel to prophesy: ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord’, the adjective could have more stress than the noun. Similarly, in ‘these

bones’ (occurring three times) there could be some adjustment between the two words, with ‘these’ being stressed the first time and then subordinated.

In verses 12-13 the words ‘open’ and ‘up’ will be emphasised in their first uttering but probably the whole phrase ‘open your graves’ and ‘up from your graves’ could be given significance the second time.

Sometimes in reading passages where repetition occurs, it could happen that stressing will initially be given to the word, then be shifted away, only to be returned to the repeated word.

Overall, consideration need to be given to the feeling being revealed, to maintaining a rhythmic flow of language, and to using vocal variation to avoid any suggestion of monotony or banality.

Read and listen to the readings each week:

rmhealey.com/sundays

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