

Reading in worship.

Part 1 — the why, what, where, when and to whom.

Hearing the Scriptures read is a vital part of the worship of the Christian community. We read the Bible in church so that God's word may be heard. The sacred scriptures are heard through the reader. It's important that the hearer receive the message clearly, accurately, and with the meaning easily understood. The word of God is never lifeless. The enemies are dullness, lack of meaning, distorted meaning, and inaudibility.

Why and what do we read?

This may sound a strange question, but a little history might explain. When the first English Prayer Book was published in 1549 the preface, *Concerning the Service of the Church*, said of the reading of the Bible:

... the ancient Fathers so ordered the matter, that all the whole Bible (or the greatest part thereof) should be read over once every year; intending thereby that the Clergy should (by often reading and meditating in God's Word) be stirred up to godliness themselves; and further, that the people (by daily hearing of Holy Scriptures read in the Church) might continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God, and be the more inflamed with the love of his true religion.

...nothing is ordained to be read but the very pure Word of God, the Holy Scriptures, or that which is agreeable to the same; and that in such a language and order as is most easy and plain for the understanding both of the readers and hearers...

The hearers

When we read in church, the listeners are, as always, a mixed bag of people ranging through the **discerning** and **dedicated** to the **distracted** or **doubting**. (We are all some of these at various times!). And, of course, there are the deaf or hearing impaired. For the first two you need to show that you know what you are reading; for the next two you must be interesting and alive. For the deaf or hearing impaired, look up, speak up (for those lip reading!) and make sure that the microphone is in the right place to catch your voice.

See Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 14.8-9. See also Psalm 95 for an enthusiastic approach! Also see Isaiah 12.2-6 and 40.9-11.

The setting

Check the roster to know when it's your time to read. At St Philip's, the roster is distributed to all on it and published on the parish website. The next week's readers are also noted in each Sunday pew sheet.

If you know ahead that you will be away please inform the roster keeper, arrange with another reader to take your place, and inform the liturgical assistant of the day.

In the service of Holy Communion, readings contribute to the part of the service called the Ministry of the Word.

- The first reading, normally from the Old Testament, follows the prayer of the day.
- Next, a psalm is read or sung.

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- The second reading is usually from a part of the New Testament other than the gospels.
- Then we share in a hymn, and a minister reads the Gospel of the day.

Moving from your seat to the lectern is not a liturgical movement. It should be prompt, quiet and without fuss. If possible, move near to the lectern just before when the reading is due.

The Spirit

“Liturgy is more than words. Words provide a framework to encourage worship, but the important thing is the spirit in which the words are used.” (Preface to *A Prayer Book for Australia*)

Or as a previous Rector of St Philip’s, the Right Reverend Gordon Arthur once wrote: “A form of words is only a means to an act of worship.”

So how do we do it?

St Philip the Deacon asks an important question for any reader of the Bible. (See Acts 8.26ff for the story) “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Your *proclamation* of God’s Word will be coloured by your *perception* of what is meant.

To read meaningfully you must *prepare*. **It is important that you prepare your reading well beforehand.**

It’s not only important *what* we read, but *how* we read.

Part 2 — the practicalities, the HOW

Prepare and Practice

Get to know the text

At St Philip’s we use the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Texts in this version are available through the readings page of the parish website or by searching bible.oremus.org.

Read the text thoughtfully. Think about the meaning, as this will influence the way the text is read.

- Understand the meaning—at least in its most simple and straightforward sense. Think about the context, the meaning of words and expressions, and the flow of the story or argument.
- Make sure you can pronounce the words and decide how the emphasis occurs in each sentence or phrase.
- Decide where to pause (and breathe) and where the words should run on without pause.
- Characterisation: do any of the words need, for example, a severe, pleading, kindly or neutral tone?
- Allow the simple feeling of the text to lend emotion to your reading: sorrow, joy, exhalation, praise etc. Experience these feelings yourself. Then they will come out naturally as you read, without having to be forced.

Having prepared the passage, practice reading it aloud at home, while standing and imagining the congregation to be in front of you. Perhaps someone could listen to you read.

Presenting the reading

Introduction

A *short* sentence of context may be helpful; if you're uncertain, check with the preacher or a minister. Introduce the reading simply, e.g. "A reading from the second letter to Timothy." [Don't say "Paul's letter to ... unless you are sure. The authorship of some New Testament letters is debated!"] The chapter and verse numbers are not needed.

Ending

Pause, and then end the reading with the words that are in the liturgy for the day. Please *memorise* them; typically they are:

- For the word of the Lord, **thanks be to God; or**
- May your word live in us, **and bear much fruit to your glory.**

Take care of the Bible or book of readings

Please don't write on the pages of the pulpit Bible or book of readings. It's often useful to annotate the text, but please do it on your own copy!

Be heard

It's better to be yourself, than to model some ideal of a public speaker. Simply use your natural ability to modulate the volume of your voice by speaking to each person in your audience. To 'project' your voice is just another way of saying, *look up and speak up*. We do it naturally, almost every day. Most people do know how to increase the volume of their voice. It's an ordinary human skill. In the everyday sense, to 'project' means to throw or thrust forward. But you can't 'throw' your voice away! In speaking, to 'project' simply means we are controlling the sound of our voice, to be heard clearly and distinctly, at a greater volume or distance. It is less of a skill to be taught, and more of a method to be practiced.

Fill the room!

Always speak with enough clarity and volume to fill the space that you are in. When we speak one-to-one, we naturally modulate our volume so that they can hear us. If they're close, we speak softly. If they're across the room, we up the volume. Choose people at the back of the space and imagine you're having a conversation with them. Speak to *them*, not to the microphone. You will naturally project your voice so that they can hear you.

Be neither proud, embarrassed nor timid

Since your sound comes from within, confidence can improve your ability to speak out. New readers, especially young and beginning readers, should work to overcome embarrassment and excessive timidity while reading in church. The hearers will always receive a sincere effort with kindness.

Posture and breathing

Good posture helps to speak well. Stand straight with your feet and arms still. Remember to breathe. Look up! Open your chest and mouth to give your voice a good sound box. Don't talk to the page. If the page is too low to see well, lift it up; don't bend down.

Form the sounds!

Open your mouth! Exaggerate slightly the articulation of the sounds, especially when practicing. Make sure the consonants are heard, especially at the ends of syllables, but use your own normal vowel sounds.

Use the microphone well

Speak to the audience, not the microphone, but position the microphone to pick up your voice as you do this. If you have a small voice, get close to the microphone (but not so close that puffs of breath are heard). Adjust the height of the microphone to about 2cm below your mouth. If you are experienced in public speaking and have a strong voice, stand back a little. By all means arrange to practice in church with the microphone, but not in the 10 minutes immediately before a service. Note, too, that there may be musical practice before a service.

Be natural

Read in your own relaxed natural voice, not in an assumed one. Don't let your pitch get too high or too low. This will be easy if you don't rush or go too slowly.

Read unhurriedly

Take your time when reading; allow the hearers time to receive the words before the next sentence rushes onto them. Look at each phrase in turn and then lift your head and speak it.

Allow the meaning and the phrasing to indicate faster and slower speed. To do this, you must have read it through beforehand!

If you stumble or make a mistake

Even the best readers stumble over a word or get words muddled. Just repeat the word(s) correctly or take a short breath and start the sentence again. (This is one occasion when you *don't* say 'sorry'!)

Enjoy reading

If you gently enjoy the ministry of reading, the worshipers will share your enjoyment.

May God bless you in this important ministry.