

READING SCRIPTURE IN WORSHIP

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Introduction

This article has been written with the following aims in mind:

- To combat casual and ineffective Scripture reading in worship.
- To provide a clear understanding of everything involved.
- To give clear guidelines for doing it really well.
- To ensure that by right understanding and practice, Lesson Readers do everything possible to ensure that the Spirit-breathed Scripture is experienced as the living Word of God.

In Part I the article starts by looking at some of the common problems that affect Lesson Readers, and how the true purpose of Reading Scripture within Worship can become lost.

Part II then goes on to rediscover the importance and purpose of Reading Scripture within worship.

Part III gives sound and practical advice for all involved in Scripture Reading.

Part IV looks at the spiritual dimension of Scripture Reading and all that this entails.

Part I - When the Purpose of Scripture Reading Gets Lost

a) THE TELL TALE SIGNS

Here are four tell-tale signs that show when the **purpose** of Lesson Reading has been lost:

1. Traffic Light Syndrome

The first is the traffic-light syndrome. It is a general feeling of indifference -

- We know the Scripture reading is inevitable
- But we know it won't last too long
- Meanwhile, there's nothing to do but sit-it-out, and -
- Wait for things to start up again!

2. During the Break

The second sign that the Scripture Reading has become unimportant is when other things are allowed to go on '**during the break**'.

- the minister sorts out his intercession list for the sick, returns to the vestry for his cough sweets, or makes essential last-minute adjustments to sermon notes!
- the stewards/sidespersons do their essential domestic tasks like flushing the toilet, shutting windows, shutting doors, getting out cups and saucers, or sorting out the lost property.
- the younger choristers unwrap their sticky sweets, while the more responsible members tidy up some of last Sunday's music that has been left around and begin to sort out what they need for the next part of the service, or generally catch up on their neighbour's news!
- the music group readjust wires, unintentionally create the screeches of 'feed-back', or demonstrate the noisy antics of recalcitrant metal music-stands!
- the organist goes off to do whatever it is he habitually departs to do, and, just as habitually, treads on one of the pedals on his way!

I realise that nothing like this would happen in *your* church, of course, but I write for those readers for whom some of the above is all too embarrassingly familiar!

3. The Feel-Good Factor

A third sign that Scripture has lost its rightful place in worship is when the reading of the Lesson is simply part of a religious Feel-Good factor.

Where there is an inherited belief that reading of Scripture is an integral part of worship, it can – surprisingly – also happen than an awareness of Scripture's value and purpose gets forgotten.

(If you believe in the devil it would certainly be his aim to try and render Scripture irrelevant and power-less.)

If you think it far-fetched to think that the original purpose of Scripture could be forgotten, consider the similar fate that can befall ordinary music, which was originally composed to be listened-to. When, for example, it is relayed in shopping malls and such like, its original purpose is turned on its head! It is deliberately played so that you will *not listen* to it, in case it distracts you from buying. The music has been so downgraded that it is not played to attract your attention, but to provide a non-intrusive feel-good ambience in the hope that you will buy more! It is played to *lull* the senses, not to feed and nourish you through them.

What people can do to secular music, Christians can do to the sacred Scriptures. The Lesson can become so downgraded, that it is not aimed to get your attention or to be intrusive, but just to help the general religious ambience – like the flowers or candles, the coloured glass or the organ music, the lilies or leather-bound books.

When Scripture has degenerated into a part of a general religious 'Feel-Good Factor' then the more archaic and old-fashioned the words the better, to deaden its dynamic power to touch, challenge and transform us. Scripture then becomes the word-equivalent to 'background music'. (Modern translations, because they communicate better, will not be welcomed as they are felt to be too intrusive.)

4. 'By the way, would you mind...?'

A fourth sign that the purpose of Lesson Reading had become lost is the **casual approach of those organising it.**

Here is my tongue-in-cheek version of an all-too-common conversation between a church leader and yourself. It takes place two minutes before the service is due to begin.

'Good Morning Mrs. Buttercup, I'm so pleased I have caught you. We need to arrange a date to discuss the cake stall at the annual Garden Party in three weeks' time. Mr. Kitchen asked me to ask you whether you would be willing to 'hold the fort' over the lunch hour. Oh, and by the way – I nearly forgot – silly me! - would you read the lesson for us? Mrs. Bloggs was going to read it but went into hospital last Monday – ooh! I must add her name to the intercession list! Anybody *seen* the 'Sick List'? I'm not sure off-hand what the reading is, but I'm sure someone will have opened up the Bible at the right place. In fact, with only two minutes to go, it doesn't seem as if the Colonel is turning up, perhaps you'd read his lesson as well, unless, of course, he arrives during the first hymn. Thanks, most awfully! Oh dear, where are my sermon notes...? Anyone seen my glasses? I think I have left them in the Vicarage.'

Poor Mrs. Buttercup! As likely as not, she will have opted to say 'Yes' to her minister, for fear that she would upset the service and its folk if she said, 'No!' Her sharp criticism of the

minister's gross irresponsibility she will – at least for the time being – have kept to herself. Immediately the panic will have set in.

- She hasn't brought her own Bible, so she cannot spend the start of the service finding her place in it.
- She hasn't got her right glasses.
- There's no time to check whether the correct places have been found in the large Bible at the front.
- She wonders whether the pages that vandals tore out of it last year will be the very ones she needs?
- The details of the lessons don't seem to be anywhere.
- The News Sheet *used* to have them, but the new editor prefers the space to be used for recipes.
- Hiding amid cobwebs on a window sill she spots a 1998 Lectionary
[A booklet which generally sets out a complete Scripture-reading scheme for every day of the year.]
Sadly the out-of-date lectionary seems to have had no successors around!
- What if the details are not on the lectern?
- What if the places have not been found?
- What if the first lesson is from some obscure Old Testament prophet she's never heard of and cannot find?
- Has any lesson reader in the past had to turn to the Index? Will she be the first one?
- Oh dear – those dreadful Old Testament names? the genealogies? the lists of musical instruments?

'Oh dear ... why did I say 'Yes'?

Well, enough of that!

This article is to help prevent such situations, not dwell on them.

(But you will understand that I had first to remind you of some of the widespread problems, before presenting you with their solutions.)

b) A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

1. The Right Approach

While my fictitious – but typical – Mrs. Buttercup agreed to reading the lesson unprepared, she could have said 'No'.

A famous and well-loved Christian T.V. interviewer (who used to present Britain's *This Is Your Life*) and who had immense experience in public speaking was once casually asked to read a lesson at short notice. He said 'No!', and later explained why -

*'The Word of God as far as I am concerned
is something which is absolutely precious.
It means an awful lot to me...
...You have asked me to go out and read something I never saw before.
If I were doing a television programme,
I would spend a whole week planning and preparing it.
I would not go out there just to read in front of the people
without putting a whole lot of preparation into it;
without having it explained to me.
I want to know what it is about
I want to know what people are to get out of it.
I want to pray about it.*

[Quoted in an article by Tom Coyle in the *Church Times*, 1987.]

Praise God for the late Eamonn Andrews for showing-up the trivial approach to Scripture that I have exposed in this first part.

2. The Right Beliefs

Our actions are based on our beliefs. If we believe that the public reading of Scripture is unimportant, we will act accordingly and make it trivial. Eamonn Andrews's approach was different, not primarily because he was a professional, but because he held different beliefs about Scripture and the importance of it being read in worship.

We will probably never acquire the professional skills of Eamonn Andrews, nor need we, but we can, like him,

- get our beliefs in focus,
- get our act together,
- read accordingly.

It is your belief and your understanding, not your speaking skills that are most important.

- **The rest of the article will deal thoroughly with all you need to know to exercise the ministry of reading Scripture in worship.**

PART II – Rediscovering the Purpose of Scripture Reading

a) THE NATURE OF WORSHIP: DIALOGUE WITH GOD

My use of the word 'worship' is the usual one, as in the phrase 'Sunday Worship', and refers to the **whole service**. (I do not use the word 'worship' to refer to an unstructured time *within* worship spent in adoration and praise – since this results in the word-confusion of having so-called 'times of worship' within 'times of worship'!)

As Lesson Reading takes place within Worship, so the role of reading within it can only be understood when the role and nature of worship itself is understood. This is by no means always apparent. Worship – like a good meal – can be enjoyed, and be a great benefit without understanding its structure or ingredients. Worshippers in general do not need to know the structure of what is happening – but those who take any leading part in worship need to understand its pattern what it is designed to do - and not do.

1. The Conversation

Good worship, whether formal or informal, instinctively follows the natural sequence of conversation. When this happens it stays fresh and flows. (Poor worship that does not follow the natural pattern and progression so often becomes wearisome and imbalanced.)

Consider the following conversation:

- *Hi John, What a nice surprise. I was hoping to bump into you.*
- Hello! It's good to see you too!
- *I enjoyed that video you lent me, but, it...er...um.*
- Come on tell me
- *I somehow got it jammed in the machine....*
- Is it all right?
- *Well, actually, No. I'm sorry but when I tried to take it out it got a bit shredded!*
- All right. Don't worry about it. Let me have it back sometime. I'm on my way into town. May I give you a lift?
- *That would be great. Thanks.*
- 'You can catch me up with things as we go along...'

(The careful reader may have spotted aspects, which, in worship-terms, might be called Greeting, Affirmation, Penitence, Absolution, Thanksgiving, Invitation, Response, etc.)

A good conversation not only moves to and fro between the two, but it also moves forwards. The state of things at its end is not the same as at the start. The relationship has moved on, developed, and been enhanced.

Good Worship is much the same. Its structure is that of a natural two-way conversation between God and his gathered people. It is helpful to describe this conversation as a series of up and down movements: i.e. God-to-us ('downward') and us-to-God ('upward') – each in response to the other.

Four things are used in worship by which either God communicates to us ('downwards'), and/or we communicate to him ('upwards').

- **Words** – said, read, or sung, e.g. in Scripture, exposition of Scripture, testimony, prophecy, exhortation, teaching, call to penitence, declarations of forgiveness, consecration, commissioning, blessing, and so on.
- **Silence**
- **Actions** – singing, speaking, breaking, processing, feeding, drinking, pouring, touching, washing, anointing, kneeling, greeting, the use of body, hands, etc.
- **Things** – bread, wine, water, touch, oil, offerings, etc.

[For a fuller elaboration of this see the article on this web-site **Leading Intercessions in Worship.**]

Scripture is one of the principal ways in which God communicates to us ('downwards').

2. God Speaking

When **Scripture is read** –

- **it is God's turn to do the talking, and**
- **it is our turn to listen.**

A very great deal follows from this. (Incidentally it explains my anguish when – as I expressed in part I – Scripture is treated *casually*. It explains why it is, to my mind, almost unforgivable for Christians to do other things during its reading, and thereby distract those who know that it should warrant our full attention.)

If God was present *visibly* and talking to us we would – I imagine – give him our complete attention. There are occasions when I have wanted to shout:

- The Lord is here! He is addressing us! SHUT UP and listen!

Of course, sometimes other things *do* have to be done during services with tea-cups, windows, books, music, doors, and so on. It is worth making the point that they will be far less of a distraction and a noise if they are done when, as can often be the case, everyone is singing. The tinkling of tea-cups will, I imagine, not matter much to God if it comes when we are all singing his praises! On the other hand, it may matter a great deal to him if it is allowed to obliterate the voice of one person who is telling those present – some for the very first time – the Good News that God has sent his Son to save us.

b) THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE: WORD & SPIRIT

For most of us lesson-reading is so routine and ordinary, that we have never asked – nor been told – what its purposes are. Our congregation has probably inherited a general feeling of muted respect for readings from the Good Book, but perhaps little more than that, and do not know – and, more importantly do not *feel* – its part in worship that I have outlined above.

We cannot read Scripture correctly unless we are crystal clear about what Scripture is, and what its role is in worship.

Let's –

- look afresh at what Scripture is, and
- attack head-on all wrong assumptions about it.

There are three essential truths about Scripture -

- **Scripture is God's Word**
- **Scripture is God-Breathed**
- **Scripture is God's Power**

Each claim needs explanation and has important repercussions for the Lesson Reader.

1. Scripture is God's Word

Scripture is not just a collection of books arising from the events, worship and personalities of Jewish history.

One of its familiar sentences summarises its central message:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. [John 3:16]

All Scripture points forward and back to this, to Jesus Christ, God's ***word made flesh***.

That message is the greatest message in the world, and is of more importance than any human message ever given. The bearers of **God's** message are – at the time – the most important messengers in the world, for their message embraces the eternal destiny of humankind, not merely its earthy events.

It follows, therefore, while the Lesson Reader may be humanly regarded as an inferior person, when he/she is delivering the divine message of God, then he/she ranks higher than any messenger of human affairs in history! The Lesson Reader is God's mouthpiece, for Scripture is God's Word.

I have no hesitation in writing that the task of the Lesson Reader is close to the role of Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus made God's message *visible*, so that men and women might *see*, listen, learn, be saved, be adopted by God, grow in holiness, and spend eternity in God's Presence.

The lesson-reader makes that same message *audible*, so that men and women might *hear*, listen, learn, be saved, be adopted by God, grow in holiness, and spend eternity in God's Presence.

Because the Bible is the 'Word of **God**'. You speak

- **God's** Word,
- on **God's** behalf,
- to **God's** people.

In Jesus we say that God's Word was 'incarnate', *made flesh* – 'embodied' if you like. The Scripture reader, when reading also embodies God's word.

While you are reading, you 'incarnate' God's message.

The message goes from print to people through you as a person. This is not automatic, like a slot machine, nor simply through your voice box. For what is heard will come through you. Your beliefs, your sincerity, your feelings, your prayers, your interpretation, your relation to the one whose Word you are reading, will *all* make their imprint on the message.

The questions behind all Lesson Reading are –

Will the person through whom, when read, the Scripture passes, act to underline it or undermine it? Will the Reader make it easier or more difficult for the hearer?

This article is written in the unshakeable conviction that any person who is called to such an exciting but awesome task will want to off-set their total unworthiness with the very maximum of human effort to ensure that God's message is delivered in the clearest and best way possible.

The Bible's claim to be the 'Word of God' rests mainly on the following:

- **Jesus Christ is *the* Word of God.**
'And the Word became flesh and lived among us' [John 1:14]
- **The Christian Bible, reveals Jesus Christ**
 - the Old Testament (The Hebrew Bible) points forward to him
 - the New Testament arises from him and points backward to him
- **The Bible is called the Word of God** because it reveals God's Word, Jesus Christ.

As Jesus Christ and the Bible are both 'God's Word', to distinguish them Christians have often called

- Jesus the *Living Word*,
- and

- Scripture the *Written Word*.

Unfortunately, this can subtly imply that that while Jesus is *alive*, the Spirit-inspired Scriptures that reveal him are *dead* !

NO! NO! NO!

(It is the 'dead' view of Scripture that produces all the horrors I outlined in my Introduction!)
The relationships between Jesus, the Holy Spirit and Scripture are like this:

- **Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, is God's Living Word in *Person*.**
- **Scripture, by the Holy Spirit, is God's Living Word in *Print***

The Holy Spirit is active in and through both Jesus Christ and the Scriptures that bear witness to him. This brings us the second claim about Scripture -

2. Scripture is God-Breathed

All Scripture is God-breathed, [2 Timothy 3:16] as the New International Version boldly translates it. They rejected the more-widely used but now rather insipid word *inspired* whose original meaning will escape most hearers.

The 'inspiration' of Scripture, its *God-breathed* nature, is not -

- *static* and *past*

but

- *dynamic* and *present*

Jesus is born of the Holy Spirit, is filled with the Holy Spirit and ministers in the power of the Holy Spirit. [Luke 1:35, 4:1, 4:18.]

What is true of Jesus is true also of the Scriptures that bear witness to him, so we may also say that:

Scripture is born of the Holy Spirit, is filled with the Holy Spirit and ministers in the power of the Holy Spirit.

- Scripture is born of the Spirit because the Holy Spirit inspired it [1 Peter 1:12]
- Scripture is filled with the Spirit because it is a tool of the Spirit to show us Jesus. [John 16:14]
- Scripture ministers in the power of the Spirit because God's creative Spirit makes God's word 'effective', i.e. it creates what it says! [I Corinthians 2:4], and the Holy Spirit interprets Scripture [I Corinthians 2:10-11].

Let me expand this last point, because although a recurring theme in Scripture, it is not widely recognised. It is a truth that tends to get lost! The **Holy Spirit makes God's written word 'effective'**.

In other words:

3. Scripture is God's Power

God's written Word is a vehicle of the Holy Spirit who is able to bring about what it claims and what it promised. It is the Spirit makes God's Word in Scripture 'effective', and full of power.

In the first Creation story (Genesis 1) repeatedly ***God said...and it was so.***

[See Genesis 1:3, 6-7, 9, 11, 14-15, 24, 26 & 30.]

The Psalmist says: ***By the word of the Lord the heavens were made.*** [Psalm 33:6]

Isaiah expresses this 'being effective' phenomenon very clearly –

***For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.***

[Isaiah 55:10-11]

We tend to feel that Jesus healed mainly by touch, but he only touched about half of those whom he healed by his word.

[See the book *The Question of Healing Services* p.76, available from this website.]

Jesus used words:

- to effect judgement
- to effect deliverance
- to effect forgiveness
- to effect healing
- to effect revelation
- to effect cleansing
- to effect new life
- to effect peace

Christ's earliest followers found that the Holy Spirit *continued* to do these things as they proclaimed Jesus. They found that his words *still* did what they said. Peter, with John, for instance, when confronted by a lame man said:

***'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you;
in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk'***

[Acts 3:6]

Both St. Paul and the writer to the Hebrews liken God's Word to a ***sword***. Their view is not of a cross-symbol hanging passively on a war memorial, but of an active and powerful weapon.

***...the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,***

*piercing until it divides soul from spirit,
joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and
intentions of the heart.*

[Hebrews 4:12. See also Isaiah 49:2, Ephesians 6:17]

The Spirit of God was not simply active in history to 'in-spire' the writing of Scripture. Sadly, Scripture's 'in-spiration' has all-too-often been regarded as, something *static*, as if seeking to authenticate an ancient legal document, or to guarantee an historical account. This had led certain scholars to make enormous efforts to commend the historical 'truth' of Scripture. This is commendable as far as it goes. But if the Holy Spirit's action within and through Scripture is omitted, they succeed in commending only its past reliability, not its present divine power to transform!

In short, Scripture is ALIVE with the life and power of God himself! We are dealing with writings in, through, and from which, the Holy Spirit brings the living God to us – to be encountered!

Scripture, then, is the Word of God and is God-breathed, but its effectiveness is not automatic – like plugging a bulb into a light-socket. There are two further aspects of it to be noted.

c) THE CONTEXTS OF SCRIPTURE: PAST & PRESENT

The reading of Scripture is related to two very different contexts:

- its original setting and purpose
- the setting in which it is read today and its purpose

1. The Past Context

This is obvious, but needs to be stressed. Not all Scripture is relevant to all Christians and all times. Its past and present contexts have to be known and have to be relevant.

Just as a doctor might believe that all medicines are beneficial, but would not regard them all as appropriate for one person, so Christians have in Scripture a rich and deep resource, which will not bring blessing if used inappropriately – however God-inspired the original text might be.

The genealogies of Jesus, for instance, are hugely significant in establishing who Jesus was, but no pastor would choose to read them to comfort a dying Christian.

Usually the Lesson Reader will not have the responsibility of choosing a reading, but the reader does need to be aware that the Scriptures vary in content, style and purpose. The fifty-

two books of the Bible contain history, hymns, worship handbooks, letters, sagas, sermons, parables, doctrinal theses, stories, visions, meditations, proverbs, allegories, diaries, and so on.

It helps to be quite clear what form of literature you are reading. You might be asked to read St. Paul's exhortation:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything with prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

[Philippians 4:4-7]

On the other hand you might be asked to read from Luke's diary-based account of his shipwreck –

At the same time they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves. The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners... [Acts 27:40-2]

The theme is similar in both: God's care. The first gives the teaching, the second (had it been quoted in full) its outworking. But they are totally different in style.

This article cannot explain or help you understand the next lesson you have to read. It is your responsibility to make sure that you really understand it. To repeat Eamonn Andrew's remarks:

- *I would not go out there just to read in front of the people*
- *without putting a whole lot of preparation into it;*
- *without having it explained to me.*
- *I want to know what it is about*
- *I want to know what people are to get out of it.*
- *I want to pray about it.*

Don't let your position or social standing stop you from *asking* and *learning*.

Knowing 'what it is about' is not always easy – and the more difficult it is, the more essential it is to know, so that the way you read it will throw its main point(s) into focus.

Eamonn Andrew's next point is perceptively made, he says '*I want to know what people are to get out of it.*' That is a completely different subject from understanding the original text, and requires quite different abilities and insights. The person who should know best is, of course, the preacher. If you have the privilege of attending a regular Bible Study you will witness at first hand the variety of ways in which God uses his Scriptures to speak to people – often at their point of need.

Envisage the people to whom you will be reading and ask God to reveal to you the main theme(s) God will give them through it.

2. The Present Context

The present context in which the reading is given will be obvious to you, and the reading needs to be appropriate in content and style. Easter is not Good Friday. Evening Prayers in an Old People's Home is not the same as reading at an outdoor Festival. Scripture-reading at a Family Service differs from that read at a funeral. Indeed, Scripture reading at funerals has rarely the same role since some families are believers and some not. The role of Scripture differs according to its present context.

Scripture and its Exposition

In most services, the Scripture that is read will be expounded or commented on in an address/sermon/homily/talk that follows.

The purpose of preaching is usually to give the congregation *time and guidance to understand, accept and apply the Scripture message which it has been your privilege to give earlier in the service.*

When you start what the preacher continues, two implications are obvious –

- Your reading ministry can provide a clear, firm, Spirit-filled and Spirit-empowered launch-pad for the ministries that will follow.

Or

- A casual reading of the required text, badly done, unprepared, and not prayed-about, may set back God's purposes for all that follows in the service.

Augustine said that preaching was "**one heart on fire setting another heart on fire**".

[Quoted by Bishop Marshall in the *Church of England Newspaper*, 06.02.'03]

Since preaching is Scripture-based, then it falls to the Lesson Reader to get the fire going! The Lesson Reader's approach to his/her ministry must do everything possible to allow the Holy Spirit to kindle the fires of Scripture in the hearts and lives of those present.

Setting hearts on fire is, of course, the work of the Holy Spirit, but if Scripture doesn't set *your* heart on fire then you might not – at this stage in your life – yet be the ideal Lesson Reader.

Your task and that of the preacher's are inseparable, even if the sermon text does not come from 'your' reading. If you convey an attitude to Scripture that treats it as *dead* and irrelevant, then you are actively undermining all items of further Scripture-based ministry, whether of Word or Sacrament. For it is the Scriptures from which you will read, that

- give authority to the ministers and the ministries of the local Church family.

- give authority to the Sacraments and sacramental acts that enrich and build up the congregation.

Treating Scripture casually in public undermines the authority of probably every Christian thing around you. Treating Scripture properly upholds, strengthens and enhances all else.

PART III - Reading God's Word to his People

a) PREPARATION

1. Which Reader?

There is immense confusion about this, because Christians are unclear about the purpose of having Scripture read.

The reasons for choosing someone to read a lesson may include any of the following:

- The Methodist minister may be chosen because it is a 'United Service'.
- The Squire may be chosen because he always reads it at Christmas.
- The Youth Leader may be chosen to represent the younger element.
- The Buddhist may be chosen because he/she is the closest relative of the one being buried.
- The Coloured man/woman may be chosen as an example of non-racism.
- The Richest person may read as of 'right' because of their generosity to Church funds.

You will be able to add further examples.

This is complete and utter nonsense!

If at a Christmas Carol Service it was decided that the first verse of 'Once in Royal David's City' should be sung by a solo treble or soprano, the candidate would be chosen because

- he/she had the right voice
- could do it well, and
- it would be carefully rehearsed.

In worship, I can see no difference in principle between a solo *sung*, and a solo *read*.

Why should the first be done by the best singer, but the second not done by the best reader?

People would protest vehemently if singing solos were badly done by a series of 'representatives' regardless of their ability to sing.

Why is there not a similar protest when reading solos are badly done by a series of 'representatives' regardless of their ability to read?

The answer is because while the majority present can detect a flat note at a hundred yards, they are not bothered whether Scripture is well read or not.

This ridiculous state of affairs arises when (as I pointed out in Part I) the purpose of Lesson Reading has been *lost* and the whole thing has become **trivial**.

Solo **singing** is almost always restricted to those available that can do it best to the glory of God.

I see no reasons why -

Solo **reading** should not also be restricted to those available that can do it best to God's glory.

Some church leaders may have to swallow their pride and acknowledge that among the many gifts they bring to God's church, the ability to read Scripture aloud in worship is not one of them. Not every Christian leader – however highly ranked – has every gift. This is nothing to be ashamed of. (The place for 'shame' rests with those whose pride prevents them from acknowledging their lack of ability, and who actively reduce the effectiveness of God's Word to his people by reading badly.)

Reading a lesson is not a routine domestic chore: serving coffee one week, washing up the next, reading a lesson the week after and cutting the grass on the fourth week! I beg every reader to take every step possible to fight against this widespread trivialising of God's Word.

Download and use copies of this article – it might say what you would not wish to say face-to-face! (Suppose a Church leader received ten copies of this from different people – he might get the message!)

The Purpose of Lesson Reading must govern who should do it. It is a widely accepted principle and we should not hesitate to impose it. We don't ask plumbers to mend electrics! Why should the Treasurer, or the President of the Mother's Union, or the Circuit Minister, or the Archdeacon, the youngest choir boy, the senior Girl Guide, the couple whose Silver Wedding it is, be *automatically* entitled to do the reading?

Now that we understand the directions of Worship, and that in the Reading it is God's turn to speak to his people, it follows that the reader must not be the sort of person to distract from God's message. Their lives must not be scandalous. Those present should remember the **message**, not the messenger. If their strongest memory is of who read it, rather than what God was saying through it, then things have become topsy-turvy.

No Celebrities!

It is no criticism of the individuals themselves to say that celebrities should be the very last people to be asked to read lessons! Why? Because it is almost impossible for those listening to put God's message before the messenger. The Holy Spirit did not inspire St Paul's writing in order to evoke comments like –

'It was a wig!'

'He was much shorter than I thought he would be!'

'What a ridiculous hat, it clashed with her dress!'

'Do you think his sun-tan was real?'

'Oooh, hasn't she aged, poor thing!'

'Good grief – look at that!'

'On telly he speaks with a Yorkshire accent, but he read all posh!'

The famous should not, generally, read lessons in worship, since it is almost impossible for the congregation to retain the awareness that God is speaking to them. The 'downward' direction of the worship (God-to-us) gets swung to a horizontal movement: us-and-the-reader. When this

happens the natural rhythm of the worship-conversation between God and his people is broken. Gods Message becomes more watched than listened-to!

What about Children?

It is a common belief among film stars that they should avoid working with animals or children since attention invariably gets focused on *them*! Animals need not concern us, but what about children? The same danger applies.

I remember about twenty-five years ago my small son's school chose him to read a lesson at a Carol Service. He did it remarkably well, although he was so small that he was not visible above the reading stand. There was a general 'buzz' among the parents of delight. Children, like celebrities, grab our attention, and are, therefore, not in the easiest position to be self-effacing and God-promoting.

Do not divert attention

Readers who are not celebrities note that the same principle applies. If you are inappropriately over-conspicuous for any reason, it will make it more difficult for the hearers/listeners to focus on God and his message. This touches how you look, how you sound, and how you behave.

Dress in keeping with the occasion and with those gathered, so that people do not focus on *you*. Each of us gets used to our own style, and may need a friend to point out if as a Lesson Reader we are distracting. This particularly goes for mannerisms. Michael Parkinson (British T.V. chat show host) has the habit of giving his right ear attention when interviewing, but it does not matter since he is not reading Scripture in public! But in Christian worship, Michael's right ear would not be the appropriate object of attention. Members of Lesson Reader teams should ask others to tell them of any distracting mannerisms. Most of us have them. It is no shame to have them, but it is a shame not to tame them for the few minutes' reading.

Aim to be Appropriate

If the occasion is large and fairly formal, read in a style that is in keeping with it. When Tony Blair read the lesson at the memorial service for Princess Diana, he read it like a fireside chat, and thereby drew too much attention to himself. I remember Blair reading, but I cannot recall what God was saying! The fault lies both with myself, of course, but also with Tony Blair. On another, 'smaller', occasion his rendering might have been very appropriate. You cannot use a 'fireside' style on a very formal occasion and when those in the back row are about a quarter of a mile away!

2. Which Passage?

God in his wisdom had better things to do than to divert his carefully-chosen writers of Scripture from their task of telling us about *him*, to composing 'religious' chapters specially for things like: Speech Days, Wedding Anniversaries, Festivals of Remembrance, Anniversaries of the Battle of Britain, Annual Fêtes, Completions of Restorations, Leader's Birthdays, Anniversaries of Hiroshima, Sunday School Prize-Givings, Environmental Protesting, Local

Government Elections, and so on. That should be reasonably obvious to most readers – but, judging by what folk tend to do with Scripture on such occasions – it needs stating nevertheless.

It seems to be widely assumed that:

- Scripture should provide a passage of 'suitable length' for every occasion.

The time-honoured solution seems to have been to dig out from Scripture a single word with some slight link with the topic, and read to the bewildered congregation the entire chapter in which it comes! Such practices hardly commend Scripture, especially if the word in question comes within a bloodthirsty account of oriental tribal warfare, or from a sacristan's handbook for his duties in his desert-based mobile tent for pre-Christian worship!

It is an exceedingly odd way to use Scripture!

If Scripture has nothing directly to say about an occasion, then it does not need our manipulations to 'correct' it and give the impression that it does. It is God's Word, not ours. If his Spirit did not inspire the writers to write passages about global warming or fox-hunting, that is his affair, not ours. We should not feel that it is our duty to make up for God's alleged deficiencies!

Such feelings are based (I feel) on an underlying insecurity about Scripture, as if the authority of Scripture needs us to strengthen it! God's Word does not need propping up by us! Its authority is not undermined if we cannot find a clear apt passage for every occasion! God's Word has its priorities, and – thankfully – they are not ours!

If you are asked to read a lesson that you genuinely feel is irrelevant to those attending, it is your duty to point it out. There is little point in giving time, effort and prayer to read a lesson if it has been wrongly chosen.

Mothering Sunday provides a typical example.

It was the reading in the Book of Common Prayer (1662) for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, [Galatians 4:21 ff.] that led to choosing this Sunday for Mothers' Day. The verses make it clear that St. Paul was not writing for 21st. century mums and toddlers many of them on the fringe of Church life, nor was he trying in this passage to support and encourage the Christian family.

For this Hagar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free; which is the mother of us all.

What the average Christian makes of that I cannot imagine! And I simply dare not think what feelings or thoughts – if any – it raises in the minds of those occasional visitors who genuinely value motherhood and like it marked by going to church and being given a small bunch of primroses, but who are otherwise unfamiliar with church, Christian worship, and the Scriptures.

If you have the misfortune to read such a lesson, then at least make sure that you give due emphasis to the single word for which it was chosen.

Thankfully, in recent decades, the choice of readings has been more practical and relevant and not chosen just because of one word tucked away in a complex theological treatise!

3. Which Version?

Lesson Readers are not at liberty to read their own favourite translation in Worship. Their ministry should be as part of a team accomplishing a closely-interwoven event. Corporate worship is *corporate* worship, it is not family prayers. It is a coming together of many diverse items into a positive meaningful whole. Whatever the Church structure, someone will be in overall charge. If the items of worship are to come together properly then the leader must have overall authority if the event is to 'gel' into a satisfying religious experience. Musicians, readers, intercessors, preachers, those giving testimonies, those leading times of worship, ... **all** should submit their ministries to him/her/those with overall responsibility. No Lesson Reader is exempt from this corporate submission. The choice of Version *matters* greatly.

Beware. Increasingly readers use their own Bibles, which has the advantage that the one they used at home for rehearsals is the one used 'on the day'. That is indeed wise: to prepare from one page layout and to read from another is to court disaster. It can be surprisingly confusing. But if one's own Bible is used, make sure the Version used in worship is not decided merely on your preferences. It may have been your mother's, it may fit into your pocket/handbag, it may be your favourite, you may have no other. None of these are reasons to dictate the choice of Version used in corporate worship.

The translation needs to be -

- the one selected by the person who will later expound the Scriptures, and
- the translation available for the congregation to follow in their 'pew Bibles'.

If the members of the congregation are supplied with service books which contain printed readings, or they have pew Bibles, it detracts from the content of the reading if they are expected to hear one version but follow another. Newcomers will shut their books in bewilderment. For others, their strongest impression will be of the *differences* in the text, not the **message** of the text.

It happens all too often.

I have been in the congregation when a visiting preacher has had to preface his sermon by a complete Scripture reading of the passage he had selected, because it had not been read. I have also experienced, more than once, a preacher using a text that the congregation had not previously heard because it was read in the wrong translation. The proper dovetailing of elements of worship entails considerable work and co-operation.

I recall as a teenager (about fifty years ago) a visiting preacher using a very powerful text for a young Christian which has stayed with me ever since:

Remember Jesus Christ. [2 Timothy 2:8]

The then-usual King James's Version had: **Remember that Jesus Christ...** The preacher's text was available in the Revised Standard Version, but, at that time, in none other.

The version does *matter*, and since, in the last thirty years new English translations have appeared (on average) annually, there is even greater potential for muddle! You and the preacher are both ministers of God's Word, even if you don't actually work together, make very, very sure you do not pull apart! You are to *underline* each other's ministries, not *undermine* them!

Why are there so many translations?

Language is always changing, and those who love Scripture have constantly to work to ensure that the inherited language does not get in the way of God's message to his people, and that God's message remains as clear as possible in ever-changing societies.

A few years' ago when the Women's World Day of Prayer chose one of my hymns [See the hymn '**Healing God**' on this website] it contained the phrase 'reconciling man to man' – wording that was perfectly acceptable when I first wrote it some twenty years earlier. The leaders of WWDP wrote and explained that now some cultures might regard this as a restriction of reconciliation to men! The use of language had changed sufficiently in just two decades to make it necessary for me to re-write that section, which – of course - I did most happily.

If that can happen in just twenty years, think what changes there must have been in the use of English since the King James's Version ('Authorised Version') of the Bible in 1611!

Since, as we have seen, the reason for reading Scripture in public is that God may speak through it to his people, there is every reason for using a translation that is as clear as possible to the listeners, and no justification whatever for using any translation that clouds God's message to them. *The Word became flesh and we beheld his glory*, wrote St. John, and we have no business hiding it again behind archaic language!

Twin Aims

The Lesson Reader might be helped by knowing that translations are not only made necessary by the changes in language, but that translations can be made with different aims. The two main aims are at opposite ends of a spectrum. Some veer towards one end, and some towards the other. The two aims are:

- reliably to convey to us what the original writers said, and
- reliably to convey to us what the original writers might have written had they written for us today.

The first is important so that we are firmly grounded in the historical events and teachings. The second is important so that people today can understand God's offer of salvation in Jesus, without first having to get a degree in Ancient History!

Here is an example of the aims of translating, and I have chosen a money-example as it is the most straightforward.

In Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan paid the innkeeper. The type of coin he used was the *denarius* and the Samaritan gave him two.

Translations range from those who stick closely to the original to those who try and make sense of it today.

Translations that stay close to the original say that the amount was *two denarii*.

The King James's Version (1611) has *two pence* – (In the old form '2d.' rather than '2p.', the 'd' actually stood for *denarius* of which the penny was a direct descendant.) But it has been many centuries, I expect, since a few nights' full board could be had for two pence!

Translators who know that neither *denarii* nor *pence* mean much nowadays, will tend to move away from the original words to try and be more helpful and clearer. Most now opt for *two silver coins*. A translator who knew the value of the coins and who put present-day meaning above all else, might translate the Samaritan's gift as *two days' wages*.

It does illustrate the different purposes of translation, and the Lesson Reader would be helped just to be aware of the range, and of the two, almost opposite, aims. Most translations are somewhere between the two extremes, and aim to be - 'as literal as possible, as free as necessary'.

Having sorted out who the Lesson Reader should be, and been alerted to the importance and roles of translations, we can turn to some practical points about the passage itself.

b) THE PASSAGE

1. Giving the Reference

The reason the reference is given is

- To enable listeners to find it for themselves in their own/pew Bible and follow it.

It should be regarded as normal for the majority of Christians in a congregation to follow the reading in Bibles. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer's Collect for 'Bible Sunday' runs:
*Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning;
Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,...*

- This makes it easier for the Lesson Reader not to intrude him/herself into God's message, since it is visible in print before those present.
- It is twice as easy to know and learn Scripture if it is both heard and read.

- If concentration is difficult when merely listening, it is much easier when following the text.

The Horrors of Inflation

The English love of the amateur afflicts lesson readers. Once folk are selected to take some sort of lead, some have an instinctive tendency to pad-things-out, to be pompous and over-wordy. They adopt a special inflated style that they wrongly think must be more appropriate for such an important occasion. (At least I can give them three cheers for realising that the occasion is an important one!)

To illustrate my point I will parody the result -

Good morning, brothers and sisters, it is good to see so many of you here this rainy morning. We decided that we would have a reading from St. Paul, this morning, and I am going to read from his Epistle, no, his *second* Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter twelve, verses one to ten, and then going on to chapter thirteen, from which I want then to read verse four.

That's pages 1234 to 1235 in your pew Bibles, and for those of you using the large print bibles I'm sorry but the page numbers are different and you will find II Corinthians chapter twelve verses one to ten on page 1673, and the verse from chapter thirteen on the following page that comes immediately after it. Although your Bibles are the New International Version, I shall be reading from the New Revised Standard Version, that's not the ordinary New Revised Standard Version, you understand, but the *Anglicised* version of the New Revised Standard Version which you may not have come across, but is very good. St. Paul's Second Epistle, then, to the Corinthians chapter twelve verses one to ten and chapter thirteen, just reading verse four.

And that's just giving the reference!! Of course it is a parody, but listen carefully to yourself and to others when they speak *ad-lib* for this is the sort of thing that tends to happen.

It is both undisciplined and unhelpful, and – what is worse – it draws attention to the Reader. You, dear Lesson Reader, have a clear job to do, **get on and do it for God's sake**. It is indeed for God's sake that you are reading, it is not a platform for you to chat, waffle and ramble on and on to your fellow-Christians. Talk to them over coffee afterwards, not as an introduction to the Scripture Reading.

Here are some rules – break them only with good reason.

- Leave chit-chat with the congregation to the worship-leader when he first greets them or addresses them in the notices.
- Remember that the reference is given primarily in order for folk to find the place in their Bibles.
- They need to know the Book, the chapter and the first verse.

- Never announce the last verse. It is pointless. Congregations are very intelligent - they will realise when you have stopped reading! All you need is *II Corinthians 12, verse 1*. Your job is to commend Scripture. It dampens the eager expectation you are hoping to engender if you tell them how tremendously long it is going to be! 'Verses four to fifty nine' strikes a wearisome note, and may put them to sleep before you start.
- The actual name of the translation/version used is of very little, if any, practical relevance. (I can hardly think of a situation in which it is worth mentioning it, unless it be at a conference of New Testament scholars.) If you make the mistake of using a translation that differs from one widely available to the congregation, then I hope you would be too ashamed to broadcast it!
- If, as sometimes happens, your reading skips some verses in the middle, it is confusing and unhelpful to say so at the start, when folk are (or should be) concentrating on finding the place. They have enough numbers in their minds to be juggling with. By the time you have reached the end of the first section, they will have forgotten the second reference you gave at the start, and you will need to give it again. Why give it to them early? and twice? When you come to the end of the first section and have to jump forward, say simply 'verse twenty-one' (or whatever it is) and, after a slight break, read on. Your listeners are not morons – they do not really need to be told '*and continuing to read at*' do they? Won't the overwhelming majority of those present know that's what is happening when they hear you reading? Isn't that an example of thoughtless inflationary verbal 'padding' that we can inherit from decades of bad lesson reading?

I think the tendency to say too much is partly nerves, and sometimes also the tendency of readers who want to make their mark, and who have not understood that the place to do that is the church pantomime, *not* the public reading of God's Word. If you cannot resist the urge to be expansive in public, opt out of Lesson Reading and join the local dramatic society where your inclinations will be regarded as positive, not negative.

Pew Bibles

Full credit to my fictional Reader, quoted above, he/she gave out the page numbers in the pew Bibles, and those of the large print editions (Many printers seem unwilling to produce Bibles of difference sizes with the same page numbering. Perhaps they are not regularly asked?)

It is usual to give the Bible reference first and the page number in the pew Bibles second. But is this the **best way around**?

Pew Bibles exist for many reasons, one is that the pre-Christian or the inexperienced Christian will be able to find Bible books with ease, and not be made to feel embarrassed or 'out-of-it'.

Does it not make sense to give the Pew-Bible reference *first*? This gives the inexperienced both

- the easy way-in via a page number
- and
- the maximum time

After they have begun their search, those more familiar with the Scriptures can be told which book it is and look it up for themselves.

The usual way around puts the less experienced at a *disadvantage*. They are told an unfamiliar book name; they see some around them thumbing through a fat book; they know they could not find the place; they do not know that they will be given a page number; they feel out-of-step with what is happening around them, confused and embarrassed. Churches buy Pew-Bibles precisely to avoid this sort of unnecessary strain on newcomers. The usual way around means that the newcomer who needs most time has the minimum time to find the place, and those who know their Bibles have the maximum.

In the light of my previous comments, the 180 words of my Lesson Reader's announcement of the Bible Reference can - you'll be glad to know – be reduced neatly and efficiently to the following.

In your pew Bibles, page 1234, 1234

In the Large Print edition, page 1673, 1673

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verse one.

It does what it is meant to do – no less, no more.

I often hear sentences like 'We have chosen to read as our lesson this morning'. This is the Lesson Reader's equivalent of 'junk mail'! It is a complete waste of everyone's time. Such needless strings of words say nothing that is not perfectly obvious, and just give the Lesson Reader a chance to hog the limelight – which he/she should not be doing.

Do the congregation imagine that lessons choose themselves? Surely not!

Do they need to be told that lessons are read? I think not!

Do they need to be told that it is 'our' lesson? If it isn't 'ours' whose is it?

Do they need to be told the time of day? Even the sleepest present will probably have realised that it is 'This morning'!

When the passage is announced by someone standing behind a massive Bible, won't it dawn on most of them that the Lesson is going to be read?

It makes me furious when members of congregations moan because according to their stopwatches the preacher was two-and-a-quarter minutes longer than their limit, while elsewhere in the service waffling away about nothing can take place without their ever noticing!

We must clear the Word of God from the clouds of verbal fog that we tend to produce all around it. I am not calling for efficiency or discipline for their own sake, God forbid! It is discipline and efficiency to break the demonic pressures on us to render ineffective God's Living Written Word. These pressures will not be broken just by sincerity – of which there is, I'm glad to say, always plenty.

A final reminder about giving the references. Do it in alphabetical order: B-C-V - Book, Chapter, Verse. If you do it backwards folk cannot begin to find the place until your final item is mentioned. Avoid 'the 21st. verse of the 5th. chapter of the second Letter of St. Paul to the...' Tell them 'Second Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 21,' and they can start looking for the book straight away.

(I am fully aware that certain denominations have set patterns for doing such things, and I am not advocating any rebellion against them. Unnecessary changes to what is 'set' may – within its own context – often draw such attention to itself that the last state is worse than the first.)

2. Quiet

If you ever had the privilege of reading a lesson in, say, All Souls', Langham Place (London, UK), you would have to wait a minute or two for the rustling turning pages to stop, as the majority present turned in their own Bibles to follow the reading. That's the noise we want to hear! But when that is over -

- Do not start until you have quiet.
- Do not start while other things are being done.
- Wait – hold your ground! Don't be rattled!
- You're the person of the moment, you have God's message to deliver.
- Expect the attention God deserves.
- Look around, so they know you are waiting.
- Let them see that you are not flustered and that you mean business.

There are three sorts of noise that you might have to deal with.

(i) The noise which is brief but you know is going to end. If an aircraft roars over, and it would drown out what you are saying if you continued – Stop! Restart when the noise subsides. The congregation will listen that much more attentively when you recommence. If you can do it with a 'light touch' so much the better - a gentle grin, perhaps, rather than a grimace.

(ii) Then there is noise which you do *not* know will end – like the pneumatic drill of nearby road works. There is perhaps no alternative but to press on.

(iii) The third sort of noise is the most difficult to deal with - personal noises. Children crying and an adult having a coughing fit are the most common. Certain things can be said about these:

- Previous prayer for your ministry, for the proclamation of God's Word, for protection from evil, and for the Risen Presence of Jesus to fill the building can, I know with certainty, go a long way to check the devil's tendency to exploit the potential disturbance of such things.
- Most people making a noise will be embarrassed, and we must be very careful not to increase that, particularly the elderly with coughing, and mothers with toddlers. Churches should make sure that a glass of water is always readily available and that there is always someone willing to take it promptly to the person who needs it. (It does not rectify the situation to have eight eager helpers who each assume that one of the other seven will actually do it. It may, perhaps, not be best left to chance.)

- Times change, and while the noisy child in earlier decades caused embarrassment to the parent, there has grown up a trend among some to feel that the noisy disturbing child is something they can let loose as of right. If that is the persistent attitude of the parent, then he/she needs to be taken in hand, and shown their responsibilities in worship. (Plus, of course, the Church may need to look at its facilities for young children.)

3. The Vital First Sentence

I shall deal with this *before* dealing with the Introduction, for reasons that will emerge.

The lesson reader should look extremely closely at the first couple of sentences to make sure that, having been wrenched out of context, they still make sense, and the Lesson Reader must rephrase and reword them as necessary. What this entails is set out in detail below.

We habitually mis-use and ill-treat the Scriptures by taking parts out of them for readings instead of reading the books in larger chunks or even as a whole, as they were first intended. (Mark's entire Gospel contains no more words than an evening paper!)

This means that our listeners never hear what went before, so lessons can begin with such a sentence as:

And when he had spoken this, he said unto him, Follow me. [John 21:19b]

No listener will have any idea what has been going on, or who is saying what to whom or why. This is not the fault of the Scripture's writings. It results from our wanting to use only short sections when the writers wrote long ones. Since it is our fault, it is up to us to take every step possible to put it right.

It is unforgivable to start a passage with 'he', 'she', 'them' and so on without replacing them with the names. This is not mutilating the sacred text to do this. It is we who have mutilated the text by cutting out a couple of paragraphs, rendering them unintelligible.

Adding in the names of 'he', 'him, and so on is nothing new.

The venerable King James's Version of 1611 translated the original Greek '*he*' as '*Jesus*' ten times in Matthew alone, so that readers dipping-in to the Gospel would know who the *he* was.

Similarly, when the compilers of the Prayer Book (1662) were faced with beginning a reading with the text I have quoted above they had before them:

And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

They used exactly the principles that every Lesson Reader should use today, and changed it simply to:

Jesus said to Peter, Follow me.

The Prayer Book compilers:

- indicated who the people were by changing all pronouns to names
- deleted the unintelligible 'backward reference', and started mid-verse.
- updated the language and put *said* instead of *saith*

They also

- ignored the verse divisions and their numbers in the text they were using
- treated the texts in paragraph units

Sadly modern Christian Lesson Readers rarely show such care and common sense!

It is not only names of **individuals** that need inserting but often **groups, places and things** need to be specified.

He (who?) came down (from where?) with them (who are they?) and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples.

The Lesson Reader, having read the preceding section will produce a version that will answer the queries:

Jesus came down from the hills with the Twelve and stood....

Here is another example:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they (who?) came to the tomb (of whom?)...
[Luke 24:1]

The Lesson Reader will reword it something like this:

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to Jesus's tomb.

If a passage of Scripture is extracted from a person's speech/talk/sermon, e.g. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, then listeners should *always* be told who the speaker is. (An increasing number of translations do this. The Contemporary English Version regularly inserts *Jesus said to his disciples* in the long teaching passages in St. John's Gospel. But the Lesson Reader should not assume that his/her translation will make the first line of every extracted passage intelligible.)

Some of the most well-known Scripture passages start in ways that will exercise the diligent Lesson Reader. Consider this one:

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph.

I once deliberately asked a Mothers' Union Group what *they* thought '*in the sixth month*' meant. (I mistakenly thought they would be the most likely to know.) None knew; some ventured 'June'.

Poor Luke, he must never have imagined that anyone would be daft enough to begin reading his first chapter at verse 26 who was not familiar with verses 1-25. Luke very carefully constructed his story so that God's wonderful dealings with the barren Elizabeth and her child

would pave the way for us to learn of his even more-wonderful dealings with her cousin Mary and her child. [See the article **Spirit of Christmas** on this website.]

In the sixth month refers, of course, to Elizabeth's pregnancy – but not even Mothers' Union members seem to realise it!

The Lesson Reader has a choice – and of course the Biblical and theological awareness differs between congregations. Either omit *In the sixth month* because it is a backward reference and will mean nothing at all to those assembled. Or, if there is some Biblical awareness in the congregation concerned, then the Lesson Reader might retain it and clarify it. This might be done thus:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy... (which is exactly what the New Living Translation has.)

An even better solution is to establish the link with Mary by inserting their relationship. I would suggest adding ‘her cousin’ as follows:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee named Nazareth, to her cousin, a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph.

The examples I have selected have come mainly from the Gospels because they are used more than other books, and they are much more likely to have passages beginning with unnamed people in unspecified places.

While the starts of Gospel passages taken out of context can usually be put right, passages cut out of the Epistles are often more difficult. Take this single example, one of the finest passages in the New Testament, it begins:

For this reason (for what reason?) *I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name.* [Ephesians 3:14]

I tried to find the *reason*, but half an hour later I was none the wiser! I then turned to a commentary that helpfully informed me that Paul's *reason* was everything that had been written in the earlier chapters – nearly sixty verses! A summary would be impossible. The diligent Lesson Reader is likely to end up with:

St. Paul writes: 'I bow my knees before the Father...

When the first person pronoun is used ('I') we are so used to it referring to the speaker, that very special care should be taken to avoid the impression that it is the Lesson Reader is talking about him/herself. If a Lesson Reader says 'I', we automatically assume it refers to the speaker (since that is the everyday pattern of all conversations we have). The insertion of '*St. Paul writes: 'I bow...*' makes it absolutely and immediately clear.

If we are quoting, then firm steps must be taken to establish **who the person is being quoted** and to get him/her separated from the Reader in the minds of the hearers.

How I wince when clergy at funerals quote *I am the resurrection and the life*. When first heard by non-Christians it must sound like a personal claim to immortality! Why don't clergy rephrase it so that immediately everyone knows that the Lord is being quoted? It then becomes - *The Lord says: 'I am the resurrection and the life'* – and everything is clear.

Backward References

Backward references that are not self-explanatory need either to be explained, or simply omitted. Here are two Prayer Book examples of backward references being deleted:

(After these things) Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee.
(As they thus spake) Jesus himself stood in the midst.

Sometimes sentences have single words in them that refer back and only make sense if the preceding paragraph has been read. Consider the wisdom of these Prayer Book deletions:

(But) When the Comforter is come
And Jesus said (also) to his disciples
(Then) The same day at evening

Today's Lesson Reader needs to do the same with the little words that refer back to what has gone before.

Not Always an Easy Choice

Readers need to look at 'their' Scripture passage early. Some initial sentences have no quick or obvious solution. Take this example:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. In the light of what I have written above you might ask 'Third day of what?', and as earlier verses do not make it clear, you might omit *On the third day* as a 'backward reference'. That would not be wrong, but it would be a pity. The '*third day*' for Christian readers and listeners has such strong associations with the Resurrection that it underlines the New Life which Jesus symbolically ushers-in with his first miracle by transforming water into wine. It is probably better to retain it. Some congregations will be affirming their faith with the words '**On the third day he rose again...**'

Let me list as rules some of the things we have noted concerning the first sentences.

- **The first sentence(s) must make sense.**
- **Do whatever is necessary to make up for the fact that we are using the passage out of its context.**
- **Make specific all references to unnamed people, groups, places or things.**
- **If there are 'backward' references to previous things not known by the listeners, either delete the reference or reword it to make it clear.**
- **If the passage is a quotation, make it clear who is speaking – and, if appropriate, to whom.**

- **If the pronoun 'I' is used at the start, make absolutely clear that it does not refer to yourself.**

4. The Introduction ?

I dealt with the **first sentence** before looking at the **Introduction**. My reason for taking them out of order is that if the Lesson Reader works to make good sense of the first sentence, then often an Introduction will be unnecessary.

If your reading starts with *He said to him, Follow me* you might feel inclined to insert as an Introduction **Jesus calls Peter**. But if you have changed that vital first sentence to *Jesus said to Peter 'Follow me'* you have probably made an Introduction unnecessary.

Recognise the fact that many people who are asked to read in public enjoy the prestige of it, and want to make the most of it. Since their performance is circumscribed by the Bible passage, the only opportunity they can have to do their own thing, is to provide an 'Introduction'.

Some forms of service wisely make no provision for this, and assume that Scripture passages if suitably chosen are able to speak for themselves. In general terms I tend to agree with that.

It is certainly obvious that on many occasions the Lesson Reader's Introduction draws attention to him/herself, holds up the flowing dialogue of worship between God and his people, and is very often unnecessary and even unhelpful.

If anything is said in addition to the reference to enable people to look-up the passage, it should be helpful and brief. It is not the place for expounding the passage – which might well be done later in the service. It can be helpful in setting the scene or putting the teaching into its context.

The headings in your Bible are to help you find sections. If you are trying to find the passage when **Christ Stills the Storm**, your Bible will indicate where it is by such a heading. That is usually *not* appropriate for your Introduction to your reading.

'Christ Stills the Storm' is a useful heading in your Bible, but for the Lesson Reader, it tells your listeners the outcome before you have even started! It then undermines the drama of the story, deadens its impact and would switch-off the attention of the hearers.

The Introduction **'Peter Denies Jesus'** ensures that no shock is experienced when the unthinkable happens.

What about something most hearers would identify with? **'Peter's embarrassment leads him astray.'**

'Paul Survives His Shipwreck Unharm.' Is there much point in telling the story if you've already told the listeners of its outcome?

‘The Shepherds Find Jesus in the Manger.’ Many hearers will think 'Oh, *that one*' and mentally switch-off. (What about **'The Joy of Obedience'** ? for, after all, they do obey God and find Jesus!)

Let's look in more detail at just the first example Introduction – the Stilling of the Storm. The Gospel writer went to great lengths to make the account vivid and to stress what is implied about the Person of Jesus. It's punch-line is ***Who is this that even the winds and the waves obey him?*** Do you think it needs any Introduction? If you think it does, then note that the main topic is not the lake but the Lord.

As it is primarily about Jesus, if it has an Introduction it would be best to give a similar emphasis. What about –

Folk are made to wonder who Jesus is?

or straight from the text:

Who is this?

In asking a question it does not feed the congregation the answer, but encourages them to listen to find out the answer for themselves. **Who is Jesus?** is also a very 21st. century question. If you wanted to nudge the hearers a little you might make it:

Is Jesus the Lord even of nature?

Obviously all I have said, here and throughout this article, will be modified in the light of the local situation. If the gathering was of young people and you were telling the story then the heading might well be **Nature meets its Match** or **Nature comes in Second** or **Jesus's Cure for Seasickness!** or **Word One: Water Nil.**

An Introduction is perhaps most useful when passages are taken from Epistles which are progressive in their thought. One obvious example is the Epistle to the Ephesians, which ends in the sixth chapter with:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God. It is a popular passage but is relevant only when chapters 1-5 have first been heeded. The Lesson Reader cannot possibly summarise the skipped chapters, but he/she could just begin to indicate that it is part of a very much wider and integrated package of teaching, e.g.

'After establishing the need for right relationships, discipline and obedience, Paul gives his final advice to the Christian.'

Such comments need to be written out. If you try to say it extempore it will come out at least twice as long and only half as good, so some of your own efforts in working it out will be wasted. Write it; prune it. Omit every word that serves no clear purpose. Be clear and don't waste people's time.

A word trap

This is a small technicality, but worth mentioning. If something belongs to Jesus, we, in English, may use either of two variations of his name. We can say:

Jesus's teaching

or

Jesus' teaching

Both are clear to see in print, but when *heard* there is no difference in sound between **Jesus'** and **Jesus**.

For this reason if something belongs to Jesus, I always opt for the slightly older-fashioned **Jesus's**, because that is the only version which makes it immediately clear to the listener. I mention it in this section, since a phrase like 'Jesus's teaching' might well occur in an Introduction.

If you really feel that a reading needs an Introduction (and that is in keeping with the pattern of worship at the time), then:

- whet their appetites
- don't give away the story/punch-line
- phrase it so that it encourages them to listen
- remember the Bible is read to teach us about God

Some printed services have at the Introduction (and/or at the end) an affirmation about Scripture. By far the best I have ever read was:

'Let us listen to the Word of God'. It is more than an affirmation about Scripture, it is a reminder to the congregation what they should do about it! Excellent! It could hardly be bettered, and I commend it one hundred per cent.

5. The Style

I will deal with the practicalities of reading in the next section, but deal with one item of style here. The question of emphasis.

The greater your love of Scripture and the stronger you recognise its divine authority the greater the temptation – for some – to seek to do it justice by emphasising everything. Check that you do not do this. It is wearisome to listen to, and throws onto the listeners the responsibility for discerning the most important point(s).

Here are two verses taken at random

- So they arrested Peter and John and*
- put them in custody until the next day,*
- for it was already evening.*
- But many of those who heard the word believed;*
- and they numbered about five thousand.*

To find out for yourself what are the most important items, try making a newspaper headline of it:

Peter & John arrested; 5000 new believers.

What is not in your summary is of less importance, and should be read without stress. Lines (b) and (c) should be read as Grade II information, not Grade I. Do not be afraid to bring light

and shade to your Scripture reading, knowing that the braver you are in putting some words/phrases into the shadow, the brighter will appear the light shining on the rest!

The passage might be read like this:

So **They ARRESTED PETER and JOHN**
and put them in custody until the next day
(for it was already evening)
BUT, many who heard the **word – BELIEVED!**
- and **they numbered about FIVE THOUSAND!**

6. The Conclusion

Some forms of service provide a Conclusion affirming Scripture and reminding the listeners of the divine authority of what they have just heard. A typical example is:

‘THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD’

Some places give the impression that it is inserted because otherwise it would never otherwise have occurred to those present! What often happens is that the Lesson Reader is so relieved and exhausted at having reached the last sentence, that 'This is the Word of the Lord' is mumbled as an afterthought as they walk away. Sometimes the tones used for this earth-shattering proclamation are those used by actors doing death-bed scenes on the television! Totally inappropriate!

When Scripture readings are treated trivially, our style denies to everyone present that we are dealing with divine and life-changing material. To claim a Scripture reading is the 'Word of the Lord' is just dry academic theology if reading Scripture is never experienced as a 'Word from the Lord'.

After the Scripture reading is finished. The reader should pause, look out and around at the congregation, and with all the authority he/she can muster should proclaim the divine source of what all have just heard : 'THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD'.

To deliver it as a 'throw-away' phrase is to perform that grotesque human miracle of turning God's wine back into water! Oooh, it happens *so* often!

Note the presence of the remarkable word '**IS**'! Amazing! The Lesson Reader is not telling them that it *was* the Word of the Lord when he/she was reading it. The Lesson Reader is proclaiming that what has been read and heard, **IS NOW** the Word of the Lord. It has moved

- from print
- to people

The Word of the Lord does not die when the Scripture reading has ended. It is a living, burning, on-going Spirit-breathed message which has already begun its work and will continue

to do so in the lives of men and women and boys and girls who have had the privilege to hear it and to open their hearts and lives to it.

The on-going action of Scripture might be likened to walking out into your garden immediately a heavy shower has stopped. The shower is over, but as you look at the refreshed earth, the washed leaves and petals, and the sparkling drops of water on everything you see, you know that you are witnessing the shower now freed and able to begin its work. Instead of looking at the rain cloud moving away and saying 'That *was* the shower', you could look around you and say '**This** is the shower!'

By the action of the Holy Spirit, the Scripture will continue to live and work and transform, although the book is closed and the reading has stopped. The Psalmist said truly ***The Word of the Lord endures for ever***, but it is not like a surviving relic – it is an ever-springing fountain.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD is not part of Scripture, and should not be tagged on as if it was the final sentence of the passage.

- The Reading is over
- Pause, (close the book if you like)
- Look out and round at the entire Congregation.
- Don't rush. Make them wait!
- Summon all the authority you can muster
- Proclaim to all present the Divine status of what you have just read, knowing that it has now been given to them.
- It now rests on, with, and in them.
- You can relax!
- Do not indulge in personal things like grinning smugly to your spouse over your success! You are still in people's view, do not distract them from the Message and its Giver. Maybe this is the most important moment of your reading! – the moment when the Christian community and Christian individuals decide whether to 'follow-up' what God has said, or drop it.
- John the Baptist said of Jesus ***He must increase, but I must decrease***. Your role when delivering God's Royal Message is supreme. When you stop, another will immediately take your place in God's Ministry to his gathered people. You must ***decrease*** instantly! You have declared God; do not fall into the trap of declaring yourself, of eclipsing his image, distorting his message, and undermining what you have worked hard to do well.

c) PRACTICAL

Below is an annotated check list, adapt it for your situation.

1. Check List

- [] If you wear glasses, esp. if bifocals, try them out at home. Stand, position the passage as if in church. Note the comfortable distance, best size of print, etc.
- [] If at all possible rehearse in church with a friend, and use the microphone if there will be one on the day. Note that the presence of the congregation will dampen and reduce your volume considerably.
- [] Try not to read faster than the acoustics of the building permit. If you do, everything may get jumbled and will echo.
- [] Find out the building's toilet facilities, and plan to be bodily comfortable when reading.
- [] If you have a text (see below) take it to Church, plus a card and pencil.
- [] On the card write clearly any words you will be using other than the Bible text, e.g. the reference, introduction (if any), affirmations (if any). Don't rely on memory.
- [] Dress appropriately for your ministry and the occasion. Men who are generally unused to suits and ties, should, if they intend to wear them, check that the collar is comfy. Old and now-too-small collars are no help to good reading! – and readers with purple-faces tend to distract the congregation!
- [] Arrive early, check where you are reading from, and that the Bible or Service Book is either open for you or has a marker at 'your' place.
- [] Check lighting and microphones, if possible, and whether you will be required to do any switching on or off. Rehearse it. (It is possible to be told 'just switch it on when you get there' and find, as I have done, that the switch you turn is the *other* one, and the one earlier referred to is neatly concealed, and its whereabouts known only to few!) If you have to do any switching – write the fact on your card, and keep the card with you. Otherwise you may forget.
- [] If at any time you need to check the microphone, blow into it, don't hit it.
- [] Get a seat reserved near the reading place/lectern, so that you can reach it easily and quickly, and, if possible, fairly unobtrusively. Find out where the minister will be sitting and have him in view. This is convenient if by pre-arrangement he has agreed to give you a nod when he wants you to move. Many buildings allow access to the reading desk/lectern from the side rather than from the centre.
- [] Examine your route clearly. Decide if you'll be wearing your bifocals as you walk there. Note steps – it is all too easy to forget them, either because of concentrating on what is coming, or because of relief at what is over!
- [] If you are taking your own book/script of the words decide if the reading desk is capable of supporting it, or whether you will have to hold it. Think though if there is any page turning to be done, and perhaps use a 'post-it'-type 'tab' to make it easy. (This would be essential if you planned to use an 'India paper' Bible because the pages stick together.)
- [] Decide what you are going to do with your hands – and stick to it!
- [] Know precisely when you are reading, especially if it is, say, at a wedding or funeral service where the structure may not be as predictable to you as your more regular services. Ask the worship-leader, and insist on a precise answer. Vague comments like 'after the prayers' can result in your standing at the lectern while the minister gives

out notices or announces a hymn! (I have witnessed embarrassed readers stranded in this way!)

- [] Sing well before your reading, this will get your lungs and breathing going well. (Shallow breathing adds to tension, deeper breathing dispels it. See below.)
- [] Don't let your nerves restrict your breathing – reading relies on breath (see below). If you engage in any deep breathing – and it is a good idea – make sure you allow a short gap between breathing out and breathing in again. This is the natural rhythm, and you can feel a bit 'heady' if you ignore it.
- [] Unless instructed otherwise, leave your seat just before the end of the preceding item, and aim to be ready to start without breaking the flow of the service.

2. How to Read

There seems to be a widespread assumption that because people are able to read they can therefore read well in public and that even if they can't, it doesn't matter much because nowadays there are microphones to help them.

- Reading in public is not simply a bellowed version of speaking in private.
- The ability to read silently does not necessarily include the ability to read aloud.
- Microphones cannot make bad reading good; they can only enlarge it.

Nerves can knock 75% off our performance; but thorough preparation and rehearsal can add 75% to it. It makes sense, therefore, to rehearse, and to try and break even.

There are whole books written on public speaking, so I can only give the main points here. They are:

Public reading, like making music on the organ, requires a regular input of lots of **AIR**. No air - no noise; shortage of air - shortage of noise; lots of air – lots of noise!

The human gets air by breathing.

Unfortunately when humans are strained/anxious/fearful, their body automatically *reduces* its air intake. This results in their speech being -

quick
quiet
squeaky!

Unless humans do something about it, any slightly anxious human will, therefore, start off public reading in the very worst possible state!

Well, that's the problem. The answer is simple.

If you are reading in public and you are even the slightest bit anxious or nervous,

- **use your mind and will to breathe *more* than usual**
- **make them over-ride your body's automatic anxiety-mode to breathe *less* than usual**

Suppose you would ordinarily have enough breath for, say, a four-second sentence. If, because of strain/anxiety you only had two-seconds' breath for it, the body almost automatically solves the problem – it gets you to read it twice as fast! Hey presto!

It is certainly one solution, but – unfortunately for Lesson Readers – it is the totally wrong one for public reading. It is this that makes voices quick, quiet and squeaky!

But, suppose with the same four-second sentence mentioned above, you didn't let your anxious body *halve* your breath, but made your mind and will *double* it! Think of the difference that would make!

With twice the air available, the original 4-second sentence you can read aloud

- with complete ease,
- with plenty of time,
- with air to spare
- with plenty of volume.
- with no rush
- with no breathlessness

Your voice would not be 'quick, quiet and squeaky', but at a relaxed pace, with volume to spare and a voice that is rich and mellow.

How do you do it? Knowing the problem is half the answer.

Begin over-riding your bodily reaction to stress long before the service. Check the pace of your walking, the fierceness of your grip, the 'locked' muscles of your lower back and thighs, the ready-for-a-fight mode of your jaw, the depth of your frown, the stiffness of your neck, the 'knotted' nature of your stomach, the invisible burden your shoulders are carrying...

(Perhaps as you read that your body is partly in anxiety-mode even now?!)

Relax all these areas one at a time. Shrug shoulders, move your neck, shake your hands, unlock your jaw, and so on – and try to keep your body relaxed, by doing that as regularly as necessary. As well as making good public reading possible, it does wonders for health and beauty! You can't lose!

Slow down your breathing. You know that anxious thoughts always make your body tense, so feed your body thoughts that are *not* anxious. Simple! Actively reverse your body's anxiety process by allowing your mind to rest among stress-free things. If you imagine your favourite relaxed/calm scene, your body will begin to respond to it by unwinding. This can be done in many ways, not least by dwelling on God's promises and provision through some Scripture or other Christian words.

Breathe deeply to relax your body, but, as I have mentioned above, allow for the natural pause between breaths. In this sort of breathing, which you want to be deep and slow to spread oxygen around your body, don't tense up the top of your body, shoulder/ribcage/neck, but relax

your tummy muscles and breathe lower down. Don't let your rib-cage heave up and down, breathe lower down. Expand your tummy to breathe it – enjoy it, your tummy will!

Having a body that suffers from M.E., I find that countless times during the day (and very often at night) I deliberately breathe slowly and deeply. For doing this, my own favourite Scripture (which has become 'second nature' to me) is:

(Mentally said while inhaling)

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,

(Mentally said while exhaling)

Who like me his praise should sing.

(Mentally said in the short pause between breathing in and out)

Thank you Jesus.

It may not be the best text for you, but at this stage in my life it is the best text for me. Find your own. The Christian has in Scripture and hymn books a vast and rich library from which to select a line or two and on which to rest in this way.

The Lesson

So the time has come for you to read the lesson. Your breathing is steady, not strained; your body is relaxed, not tense; you feel unhurried, not rushed. Your reading ministry now feels less like a duty and a chore and more of a privilege and a joy. God has chosen you. He knew what he was doing!

It is now that all your preparation will pay off. There's nothing to fluster you. You don't have to pretend to be Christ's ambassador and play the part, you *are* Christ's ambassador. Your position in him places you above the situation not under it.

Perfect love casts out fear. As you have prayerfully prepared, the Holy Spirit has switched your attention away from yourself to God and his love for those assembled. You begin to share his love for them, and instead of fearing for yourself, you begin, instead, to yearn for them and for their needs to be met. This reorientation moves you away from an over emphasis on yourself, and frees you, and lifts you up, for your Ministry of Reading.

There are just a couple of practical points.

When a Reader is looking straight ahead (as in most conversations we have) his/her voice comes out clearly. When we bend our heads forward, the appropriate pipes begin to behave like a kinked garden hose! The air and sound get strangled! Most of the Royal Family are perfect examples of how *not* to do it. They speak with their scripts tucked down close to their bodies and their heads bent forwards. This gives the public ample opportunity to study the tops of Royal heads, but rarely to see the Royal faces. They have, of course, to rely heavily on microphones.

The Lesson Readers in worship know better. They may have no microphone. They will face their heads forwards. Their voice will be projected outwards, not swallowed, and their faces, rather than the tops of their heads, will be seen by the listeners.

Once they have positioned their head in the right place, they will aim to keep it there – facing straight forwards.

- Rather than keep their eyes forward and
- droop their heads right down
- to see the passage,

they will

- **Keep their heads well up**
- **lower their eyes, and**
- **raise the passage up so they can see it.**

The DIFFERENCE, I can assure you, **IS ABSOLUTELY REMARKABLE**. It is, of course, the difference between a squashed windpipe, weak voice, and a semi-bowed body with eye-contact impossible and a Reader who is free to make eye-contact with his/her listeners, standing erect, with breath and voice at their very best.

It is worth repeating:

Keep your head and eyes facing straight ahead,
lower your eyes, so you are looking down your nose
raise the script until it is in view
Keep that stance until your ministry is completely over.

To maintain the poise, peace and authority with which you begin, take simple steps to keep your breathing relaxed and full.

Start each new sentence by launching it on a fresh breath.

Where there are punctuation marks, pause – and take a breath if necessary.

Try counting 'one' for most commas, and counting 'one-two' for most full stops. An end of a paragraph can easily take a count of 'one-two-three' or more.

Use your own selection of little things that you know help keep your body relaxed and breathing well.

As a Lesson Reader you speak with authority God's Word. To have authority is to be on-top-of-things, not weighed-down by them. When you get your mind/body in the right mode for reading in public, there is the added bonus that it will also add to your authority! The congregation will know immediately whether the Reader addressing them is someone who is on-top-of-things, or is being crushed by them. If they experience the former, then it is easier for them to give to what you read the authority God deserves.

3. The Script

I have quite often mentioned 'The Script'. In these days of easy print-outs and photocopiers, it is fairly easy, should you want it, to read from your own typed out and enlarged version.

If you do this, you can type the lines (as Churchill did his speeches) as you want to read them. The line breaks can indicate a pause/breath. In addition you can by the way you type it convey what you want stressed, and what not. You can play around as much as you like with any font sizes, underlinings, capitals, italics or punctuation marks – and do absolutely anything with it which will ensure that you read it as you had planned. Here is an example of a familiar passage to give you the idea. (Your version to read from in public would, of course, be greatly enlarged.)

The short lines make it much easier to see, and enable you perhaps to look away from the text to the listeners, but to return to the text easily. (Keeping a finger by the line is a good idea.)

Most sentences can be read in a variety of ways. The stresses in my example are not 'the correct' ones, merely one possible way of reading it.

*In those days,
a **decree** went out (from Caesar **Augustus**)
that **all the world** should be **registered**.*

*[[This was the **first** registration –
and was taken when **Quir-in-i-us** was governor of Syria]]*

***All** went to their **own** towns to be registered.*

***JOSEPH ALSO** went (from the town in Nazareth)*

*to **Galilee**,*

*to the **CITY** of **DAVID***

*called – **BETHLEHEM** !!*

*(because he was **descended**
from the house and family **of** David)*

You will immediately see the advantage of doing this.

- **You read your very own interpretation of the reading from you own script.**

You do not have to add your interpretation 'live' from the Biblical script in front of you. Your interpreting has been done. Nothing is foolproof, but this gets near it, and if you are *particularly* anxious that nothing should go wrong, then this can remove an area of strain.

I have found it a particularly useful thing to do when, for instance, the family of a non church-goer asks him/her to read at a funeral. I have, in the past, written out in good time detailed notes of what the passage means, and then gone through it with them. I have then typed-up the passage in the manner of my example above.

PART IV – The Spiritual Task

a) THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

There are many Christian 'ministries' undertaken for Christ/for his people. Unlocking the church door and switching on the heating is obviously an extremely important one. Although that is a Christian ministry it is not a 'spiritual' ministry, in the sense that doing it may not automatically involve you in spiritual things or pitch you into the deeper conflicts of the spiritual life.

To say that someone's ministry is 'spiritual' does not make it more important or more prestigious than one with a ministry you would not describe in that way. The Holy Spirit distributes many gifts for many ministries. If, say, your main ministries have been the upkeep of the building or the provision of refreshments, then you might find that the ministry of reading God's Word in public is a different thing altogether, and requires the back-up of spiritual awareness and discipline that your earlier ministries did not demand.

While it is good if you prayed about those you perhaps fed physically, it would be a bonus to do so. For those you feed spiritually – it is, however, essential.

Reading God's Word in public is a spiritual ministry and all that I have said above about how to do it well, needs to rest upon spiritual foundations of **prayer** and **discipline**.

Lesson Readers – who know what the ministry involves so much better than most other folk! – need to pray for one another, support one another, and, ideally, establish relationships that can enable practical help – not least constructive criticism and encouragement.

The worship leaders should as part of their preparation for worship pray first for God's peace and presence in the building, to the exclusion of anything that does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

They should pray for the different ministries involved – which will include yours – and for the service to 'flow' so that God's Holy Spirit may – with minimum hindrance – use it to work in the lives of those present.

You should pray for those attending. That God will gather those of his choosing, that each one will be open to hear and receive God's Word through the ministries of yourself and others. Pray that they would meet the Living Lord, either for the first time or afresh. Pray that they would grow in commitment if young in the faith, and in maturity if older in the faith.

When Jesus explained his parable of the Sower, he said of the seed that fell on the path '... **when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.**' [Mark 4:1-9, and 13-20, and especially Mark 4:15b.] This should alert you to pray that the devil would not uproot the results of your ministry. In the days after your ministry pray for the nurturing and growth of God's Word in the lives of those who attended, and be alert to the possibility that you yourself may have a part to play in that.

For in Lesson Reading you have, through the Holy Spirit, spoken to each of them personally. They will feel that, and may well want to carry on the conversation! If they do, regard it as a positive aspect of your Reading Ministry and calling.

Because this ministry is very much in the spiritual 'front-line', you will not be surprised to share the general Christian experience that ...*our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic power of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil...*

In short, the better your ministry, and the more you advance God's Kingdom, the greater reaction you may get from the spiritual forces that are always at work to undermine it. Regular prayer, like the Lord's Prayer (which includes deliverance from evil) and a disciplined and moral way of life will go a long way in establishing you firmly on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and enable you to enjoy his protection and share his Victory. You should have – if you do not have already – a mature Christian friend who knows about these things, and can interpret for you what is going on.

It would be sad and ironic if having a ministry of Reading God's Word, you yourself did not feed and feast on Scripture regularly. It is beyond the scope of this article to guide you in this, but do have a word with your priest/pastor/soul-friend.

I once drew a cartoon of a completely bald, and somewhat embarrassed, salesman showing a bottle of hair-restorer to the viewer. I had him saying – 'Yes I *know*, but I can recommend it!' The point is clear. It certainly applies to some. Happily it will never apply to you.

b) CONCLUSION

I obviously believe that God's Word deserves the sort of meticulous care that I have outlined, or I would not commend it to you. In wanting to be meticulous I do so not to replace the Holy Spirit by human efficiency, but to use human efficiency as a spring board so that the Spirit's free-flowing to the congregation is not unnecessarily diverted and muddled by human carelessness and inefficiency.

Of course the Holy Spirit can sort out and overcome our muddles, mistakes and weaknesses—after all we give him more than enough practice! – but his power to put things right is no excuse for our regularly making them wrong!

Please help me rescue lesson reading from the triviality that so many Churches have slipped into.

- **Copy this article**
- **Give copies to your minister**

Give copies to those who read lessons in your local Christian community.

May the Lord bless you in the outworking of your special ministry.