

**Worship Ministry –**  
**Tips on Reading of the Scriptures at St. Mark's**

"Learning to control the voice and body properly is not arty or theatrical. It is basic in direct and honest communication. The person who feels it presumptuous to use the best possible technique in reading the Word of God has forgotten, perhaps, to whom he is indebted for that voice and body."--Charlotte Lee, Oral Reading of the Scriptures

**How and What we do at St. Mark's:**

1. Read from the lectern. (Prayers of the People are recited from the pew. If you are reading the Prayers of the People, try to sit from the middle of the nave to further back so you can be heard.
2. Read from the "Revised Standard Version" Lectionary on the lectern, which is the same version printed in the insert of the bulletin. It would be best to use a copy of this version of the Bible for preparation at home.
3. Following the week's readings are listed in the bulletin. Contact the Lector and Lay Ministry lead if you don't have the information when it's time to prepare. Alternatively, you can contact the Parish Administrator or discern the week's readings from the Lectionary on page 888 of the prayer book.
4. Rector will ensure the microphone is turned on. It would be advisable to verify the lectionary is open to the proper readings for the day before the 10:00 service.
5. Don't race up to the lectern, but be promptly on cue and don't saunter up,
6. Settle in at lectern for few seconds to get your bearings. A slight delay also helps the congregation to prepare themselves.
7. Make initial eye contact, before or during introduction of reading.
8. Announce reading--variety of acceptable ways.
9. Closure – after reading, state the following: "The Word of the Lord"

**What is Interpretive Reading (of the Scriptures)?**

A simple definition might be reading aloud before an audience. Why aloud? In the early days of the Church, few could read, so reading aloud was essential to teaching people about God and Christ. Today, most everyone can read, but few choose to read the scriptures routinely, so it still is an instructional tool.

And, the experts agree that like all other great literature, the Bible must be read aloud to realize its full potential. But to achieve this, it must be read well.

Therefore, what we scripture readers should be doing on Sundays is called interpretive reading or oral interpretation and it is more than the mere translation of written words into sound. It is communication of the human experience.

Oral interpretation is the art of sharing with an audience a work of literary art (in this case, the Bible), in its intellectual, emotional and aesthetic entirety. It's accomplished by a voice and body

operating under a disciplined and informed mind that understands all the elements in the piece of literature and the way they operate together to produce a whole. Thus, the interpreter should be concerned with thorough analysis, painstaking rehearsal and strict discipline of body and voice.

From this, one can see that reading scripture on Sunday is more than simply reading words aloud from a book. Unfortunately, this is the level most of us achieve some Sundays if we don't prepare or rehearse. What we want to achieve is the communication not just of a message, but to share a human experience, our experience, of the author's ideas and feelings.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT**

You can't begin to expect an audience to understand the meaning of a passage you're reading unless you yourself have an understanding of the material. And it is your understanding here that counts. This will require some study and analysis. Understanding a writer's techniques and style is also important to reaching your own understanding.

1. Understand the setting--time, place, characters. For preparation purposes, this will often require you to read much more than the appointed text in order to place the material in the proper context.
2. Understand theme--what is the point the writer is making, what is the meaning.
3. Understand use of words. All words have a dictionary meaning, or denotation. Many also have an emotional, subjective meaning, or connotation. These are words which by their very utterance conjure up images in one's mind. Consider, "a brick-throwing hippie" as opposed to a "bearded, guitar strumming hippie." Figures of speech--similes, metaphors, hyperbole, personification and others all abound in scriptural writing.
4. Understand sentences. You may want to break down into shorter parts long and complicated sentences--both for your own understanding and in your presentation for audience understanding. Look at the syntax or sentence construction of long sentences to discern meaning.
5. Understand use of quotation marks. How you interpret a passage depends on who is speaking and what is being said. Don't lose sight of quotation marks in longer passages.
6. Understand (and practice) word pronunciation. Don't ask your reader to translate slovenly speech sounds or mispronunciations. Sounds should be distinct, correct and pleasing. Biblical names and places can be very difficult. Use the guide to pronunciation of Biblical names found in the front of the Bible (very helpful) or use a concordance or biblical dictionary which the parish has in the library.
7. Understand the use of rhythm. Rhythm defies explanation, but you'll know it in its absence. Obvious in poetry, but present in prose too, a rise and fall, emphasis, pattern. Reading without rhythm is listless, boring.

There is no magic wand for achieving your personal understanding of a particular passage, but the ability to read scripture or any prose accurately and communicatively will increase as you know the theme of the writer, understand the denotative and connotative aspects of the wording and become able to sense and respond to the rhythms and cadences of the passage.

### **PRINCIPLES OF AUDIBLE COMMUNICATION**

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Ordinary speech of most people is adequate for general conversation. But oral interpretation of literature requires additional flexibility and special control. The fact that you speak every day and have done so since childhood is no guarantee that it is an adequate instrument for the satisfactory communication of difficult material such as that found in the Bible.

The variety of the human voice is actually the result of the interaction of only four variables.

1. Rate--duration of speech sounds; tempo of phrases, sentences; pauses and silences for intellectual and emotional reasons; rhythm. Rate is related to the nature of emotion. Excitement, action, fear, anger, indifference are associated with faster rates. Contempt, grief, somber mood, serious selection would be slower rates. Control your rate so you don't read too rapidly for listeners to comprehend. Generally, we need consciously to slow down from what is "normal" for us. Also, read at a variety of speeds. Study the material and read at a rate appropriate to intellectual and emotional content. Practice holding on to certain sounds for effect. Enjoy words for their sound as well as images they suggest. Pauses are purposeful absence of sounds. They are necessary to understanding and must be used in the right places. They are the major devices available to a speaker for punctuation. Punctuation, after all, is an aid to understanding meaning. Some pauses are individual and can be used for emphasis and effect. Vary and sustain them as you deem appropriate.
2. Force (at times called stress, intensity or loudness) It goes without saying that all understanding, timing, pauses, inflections, etc. are all wasted if an audience can't hear you. We're not talking about shouting or screaming. That's what you do at a football game and you get hoarse or a sore throat. We're talking about voice projection, force which comes from the push of air from the diaphragm past the vocal chords. This requires only minimal degrees of physical exertion. If you're exerting too much, you're doing it wrong and can damage organs. Correct breathing is the solution and good posture is essential to proper breathing. Allow abdomen to "absorb" air as you breathe. Don't hold stomach in and expand rib cage only. Exhalation for speech is reverse process. Control abdominal muscles to ensure that breath is used economically. Proper breathing via the abdomen is essential for a singer, an athlete, actor, public speaker and lector.
3. Pitch--the highness or lowness of a voice on a musical scale. We each have a habitual level of pitch at which we tend to speak, with voice varying up or down from that. Expressiveness without changes in pitch is impossible. The entire animal world uses variations in pitch- to communicate meaning. Heightened pitch is usually accompanied with loudness. A passage read without varying pitch will be dull, listless and boring...think of the sounds a robot makes. The following are the mechanics of melody, just as in a song:
  - a. Key--the general level of pitch for an extended section of speech.
  - b. Step--Variation in pitch between words or syllables.
  - c. Inflection or slide—change of pitch in one syllable. Rising inflection shows uncertainty. Falling inflection indicates certainty.

4. Vocal Quality is your persona, closely linked to you. Think of the "quality" or timbre of a tuba vis a vis a clarinet. Human voices are like that too, each distinct. But there is an optimum quality for each of us that is achievable--a full, resonant sound easy and pleasant to listen to; a sustained control that stems from efficient employment of the vocal mechanism; and seemingly effortless production of speech. A speaker is more "listenable" when his vocal quality is pleasing and varied. Just think of your favorite speakers, announcers, etc. Breathily, throaty or guttural, hollow, nasal, or oral (Betty Boop) are all kinds of distinguishable vocal qualities. Some undesirable ones may be overcome with training and practice. Don't adopt a "ministerial" tone. It's pompous and deadly dull.

## **BODY COMMUNICATION**

Using the body--any muscular action of the body--conveys meaning of some kind. Therefore, even how you get to the lectern, let alone what you do once you get there, sends a message and sets the stage for what comes next. Bodily action during your presentation is effective when it is so unobtrusive as to go unnoticed except as it contributes to total audience response and is free of distracting personal mannerisms. The body should be in a state of controlled relaxation. Gesture only to clarify meaning or to convey emotional quality. A gesture that calls attention to the reader is distracting and should be avoided. In reading scripture, gestures will probably be most effective if limited to facial and head movements.

## **PRACTICE. PRACTICE. PRACTICE**

Once you feel you understand the reading and think you know what your rate(s) should be, the force you need, pitch and body language, practice your reading aloud. Get it to how you think it sounds best. Then if you can muster the courage, practice before someone. Ask not simply for their reaction, but ask for specifics. You should be able to tell their true reaction by glancing at them from time to time. But don't settle for "Oh, that was great." Ask them why. And if you don't want to practice on your family or if you want help, ask someone at St. Mark's, whose oral reading you appreciate, to listen and critique you.

## **REFERENCES:**

Ecroyd, Donald H. and Wagner, Hilda Stahl, *Communicate Through Oral Reading*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979.

Lee, Charlotte I., *Oral Reading of the Scriptures*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.

Rowen, Elbert R., et alia, *Communicative Reading*. New York: Macmillan, 1978.