

Some Thoughts on Reading in Church

Principles

The Point: What is it that we're doing? More than conveying information: Ministry! A reading is not the warm-up act before the sermon, but something of equal status that stands in its own right.

Prepare! Both to become familiar with the passage (rehearsal), with its shape, structure and flow, and to read with understanding. Reading well always involves a degree of interpretation; we are therefore doing theology. If in doubt, discuss with the service leader or clergy team.

Genre: The Bible is a library of quite different kinds of literature. The reader needs to understand the genre and read the passage accordingly.

Focus: Any speaking/reading/singing etc done in public needs to focus the attention of those others present. The question in a church context is where that focus is directed. As with many things in the life of the church, reading is not about the reader, but involves a stepping aside so that the focus is on the far more important relationship between God and his gathered people. Not easy!

Drama: The Bible is full of drama, and often it is under-dramatised. But there is an opposite danger of being over-dramatic ('Pimp My Read'?). The aim is to let Scripture speak for itself. KISS! (Keep It Simple, Stupid).

Practical

Openness: It is important to lift one's face and address those gathered, at least some of the time. If we are afraid of losing our place, it can help to print the passage out in larger font and underline or colour code for emphasis and/or structure. But if using a separate sheet, also bring the Bible to the lectern – otherwise it could be anything.

Pace: A public reading needs to be slower than we would speak in conversation. The acoustic of a large space means that one's voice easily becomes muddled, unless the pace is slower.

Projection: It can be helpful to choose someone at the back and focus on delivering the passage to that person; this naturally helps with pace and projection.

Punctuation: 'Read' the punctuation as well as the words - that is, a comma generally means a pause, a full stop a longer pause, etc. Just as we need punctuation on the page to make sense of a text, so a congregation needs aural and visual punctuation to make sense of a reading. Bad reading ignores the punctuation. Use silences. No punctuation, no sense!

Punctuation! (Mark 7.26...)
THE WOMAN WAS A GREEK
BORN IN SYRIAN PHOENICIA
SHE BEGGED JESUS TO
DRIVE THE DEMON OUT OF
HER DAUGHTER FIRST LET
THE CHILDREN EAT ALL
THEY WANT HE TOLD HER
FOR IT IS NOT RIGHT TO
TAKE THE CHILDRENS
BREAD AND TOSS IT TO THE

Sentences: These have beginnings and endings! Avoid the common mistake of dropping the voice at the end of a sentence. Equally, lifting the voice at the end of a sentence often turns it into a question? (and can make you sound Australian...). Try to keep the sentence taut from beginning to end, and then change the stress for meaning.

Shape

Prepare people: People need time to settle down, find the passage if they wish, and to tune in to your voice. Say what the reading is, and on which page of the pew bible. PAUSE, perhaps saying again what the reading is. You are gathering people together to hear God's word. Don't rush; when you have people's attention, begin...

Headings: The paragraph headings in the pew bibles are an aid to finding a passage. They are NOT a part of Scripture, and should NOT be read. That's official!

On Silence: (T.S. Eliot)
Where shall the word be found,
where shall the word
Resound? Not here, there is
not enough silence.

Begin well: For some readings it can be helpful to give a sentence introduction to put the reading into its context. It's important to discuss this with the service leader, who has the final say; it might be that the context is already covered by other means. Make sure that any introduction is clearly distinguished from the reading itself.

Initial Pronouns: Often a reading starts part way through a narrative, and might begin 'And as he travelled/began to speak...' etc. It is important to clarify who 'he' is, either with an introductory sentence as above, or by replacing 'he' with 'Jesus' (or whoever).

End well: At the end of a reading, PAUSE, holding the attention of those present to what you've just read. The response we typically use ('This is the word of the Lord'...) provides a clear end to the whole reading.