

On the Ministry of Lay Readers

<https://livingchurch.org/2016/03/04/ministry-lay-readers/>

March 4, 2016 Essays & Reviews

By Stewart Clem

I was in the vesting room when one of our lay readers approached the rector with a question. He wanted to know if he could read the Old Testament lesson from the King James Version. He believed the Jacobean language of the Authorized Version was especially fitting for this passage of Scripture, in which God asks Job, “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:4). I was struck not only by his unusual request, but that this faithful lay reader had taken the time to look over the passage well in advance, reflect on it, and bring his own printed text to church.

When the lector announced the lesson during the liturgy, he mentioned that he would be reading from the King James Version, and there was an awkward chuckle throughout the congregation. Was he serious? Once he began to read, it became clear that, yes, he was quite serious. I’m also certain that most of us listened to the words of this reading more attentively than we had listened to any Old Testament reading in the last several months.

One of the many merits of Anglican liturgy is the vast amount of Scripture it incorporates. On any given Sunday morning, one is likely to encounter a reading from the Old Testament, a passage from the Psalms, a portion of the New Testament epistles, and a reading from one of the gospels — plus the scriptural references and allusions in the liturgy. Clergy once did all Scripture readings on days when Holy Communion was celebrated. For several decades now, laypeople have read the lessons (with the exception of the Gospel).

Nowadays, however, lay reader is virtually obsolete in the Episcopal Church. Even the ministry of reader in today’s Church of England has no analogue in its American sister church. English lay readers, designated by their blue tippets, have wide responsibilities and typically must undertake some level of formal theological education. Where lay reader is still used colloquially in Episcopal churches, it usually refers to a layperson who volunteers to read one of the Scripture lessons during the Holy Eucharist. The Book of Common Prayer (1979) still uses the term in a few places, and it directs that laypeople should read the lessons preceding the gospel (p. 322).

What happened to our licensed lay readers? This used to be a designated office, one that required a license from the bishop. It involved much more than reading the lessons, however. Lay readers were authorized to officiate, in the absence of a priest, at services of Morning and Evening Prayer as well as the ante-communion portion of the Eucharist. In some circumstances, they were authorized to preach and exercise other pastoral duties. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this ministry was at first restricted to candidates for Holy Orders. And the corresponding penalties were grave: any nonconformity with the canonical guidelines for lay readers was “deemed in all

cases a disqualification for Holy Orders.” Eventually the office was opened to all laity, readers were allowed to assist ordained ministers (not only in their absence), and the list of responsibilities included administration of the chalice.

Today’s canons in the Episcopal Church do not mention lay readers. Most of the responsibilities exercised by lay readers are now covered under a new set of licensed lay ministries, such as “Eucharistic Minister,” “Preacher,” and “Worship Leader” (Canon III.4). But there’s one item that got left in the dust: reading the Bible in church. The prayer book simply states that the lessons are to be read at a certain point in the Holy Eucharist, and there are no canonical guidelines on who is to perform this function. This is a shame, because it implicitly suggests that the role of the lector is merely an afterthought. Reading the Bible is serious business.

In many churches, the readings are performed by a well-meaning group of volunteers who receive little guidance. It shouldn’t be too difficult, right? But, as experience has shown, poor reading can easily turn what should be a moment of meditation into a tedious test of endurance. You know what I mean if you’ve ever sat through a reading of the Old Testament in which the lector was blindsided with a smattering of obscure names or references to Ancient Near East geography. Even the most literate person may stumble through one of St. Paul’s epistles. Regardless of the specific content, reading in a public setting is not as simple as one might expect.

But this is all the more reason to evaluate the way we read the Bible in church. Of course any of us may read the Bible at leisure in our home or virtually anywhere. The Bible is the best-selling book in the world, and there is no shortage of websites and smartphone apps that put the Scriptures at our fingertips. Unlike many other periods in the Church’s history, availability is not the problem. But the Church has always privileged the public reading of Scripture as an act of worship. When we hear the Bible being read on a Sunday morning (or at any of the other offices), this is what the Spirit is saying to the Church right now. We should listen. Given the nature of public worship, our ability to listen in this context is contingent upon the reader’s performance.

This is also why lay readers should consider their responsibility for what it is: a ministry. And like all ministries, serving as a reader involves more than simply showing up. Good reading enables the congregation to hear God’s Word with clarity and reverence, perhaps even in a new light. It should also be seen as an opportunity for evangelism. There is always a chance that, for the unchurched sitting in our pews, it is the only time they will encounter this portion of God’s Word. The way we read the Bible in Church is a reflection of how seriously we take the Bible in the life of the Church.

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Tips for Lay Readers

1. Approach reading as an act of devotion. Look over the text before Sunday morning. Take the time not only to read the passage but also to meditate on it. Say a prayer before reading, and ask the Holy Spirit for illumination. If you have time, read a little bit of the text before and after the assigned passage for a better sense of the context. Once you have a better sense of the text's meaning, you'll be better equipped to convey that meaning through your reading. This kind of preparation will enhance your ability to worship throughout the liturgy. You may be surprised to find connections in the hymns or in the sermon that you would not have noticed otherwise.

2. Practice. This is less about your mindset than the nuts and bolts of public reading. It helps to read the passage out loud when you practice. When we read silently, our minds make subtle corrections as our eyes skim the text. Read aloud, noting your speed, tone, and enunciation. It's usually better to read slowly rather than too quickly. Be sure to pause at appropriate points, and enunciate your words more deliberately than you would in everyday conversation. Biblical texts are not scripts for dramatic performances, but the authors (and translators) have put a great deal of thought into word choices and sentence structures, and the various genres within the Bible each have their own cadence. A careful reader will be sensitive to these details.

3. Ask for help. The Bible mentions strange names and places. I'm a priest with seminary training, and I still encounter biblical words that I have no idea how to pronounce. You're not alone. The Harper Collins Bible Pronunciation Guide helps, but most readers will find it more convenient to use an online pronunciation guide (St. Peter Parish of West Brandywine, Pennsylvania, offers a four-page PDF). Websites like Bible Gateway offer an audio option for most translations, so you can listen to the passage as read by someone else.

4. Read with confidence. Confidence that results from preparation is the ideal, but in the event that you have not prepared, fake it. Yes, I mean it. Fake it for all it's worth. Don't know how to pronounce Ehud or Maher-shalal-hashbaz? Say it as if you do, even if it's nowhere close to the correct pronunciation. Why? Most people will not notice. It's far better to pronounce incorrectly with confidence than to pause awkwardly, contort your face into a confused expression, and then mumble through some incoherent syllables as if you've just received anesthesia in your mouth. At the conclusion of the reading, pause briefly before confidently saying "the Word of the Lord" (or "here endeth the Lesson"). Remember, it's not your own authority that you're invoking, so there is no need to feel awkward or sheepish about making such an authoritative declaration.