



The Catholic Archdiocese of  
Canberra and Goulburn

# The Ministry of the Reader

## Historical Background

In the early Church, as in the synagogue, the community deeply respected the Word of God. When the community gathered on Sunday, they read from the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. The Jewish scriptures were read right through over a number of months i.e. without omissions.

The Christian scriptures (the Gospels, the Letters of Paul and others) were collected and written down over time. In the early Church, different cities and sometimes different churches in the same city, chose and proclaimed a different number of readings in their Eucharistic liturgy. For example, Rome had three readings whilst Constantinople and Milan had four. Sometimes, in addition to the sacred Scripture, there were readings from the Acts of Martyrs and other Christian writers of the period. It took several hundred more years for the Canon of Scripture (the collection of officially recognised inspired writings) to be put together.

Over the centuries, there was an attempt to organise readings for the Church's liturgical cycle. For many years, these were recorded in a Book of Epistles and the Book of Gospels. For hundreds of years until the 1960's there was a one year sequence of readings which was almost entirely taken from the Christian scriptures.

The renewal of the liturgy encouraged by Vatican II led to the development of a more comprehensive Lectionary. A Lectionary is a book of Scripture readings used during the Liturgy of the Word in Catholic worship. The Lectionary provides the Bible passages that are proclaimed by readers and presiders at Mass. Today it contains large sections of both Jewish and Christian Scripture. Now we have a three year cycle of readings for Sundays, and a two year cycle on

weekdays. The First Reading and Psalm are linked with the Gospel of the day. The choice of readings in the Lectionary was made carefully to ensure the people have an understanding of the mystery of Christ. The Lectionary is such a comprehensive work that many Christian churches use the same readings as those chosen for the Catholic Church.

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Originally, a reader was a lay person, who could read and was called and ‘anointed’ by the community to use his/her gift in the liturgy. Later, as larger gathering places, e.g. basilicas, were used instead of homes, an ability to project the voice was also important. Increasing clericalisation of the church later meant that the community's leader (the bishop or priest) alone could read. In time, the Epistle and Gospel came to be read by the subdeacon and deacon respectively, and the role of lector (reader) was considered to be part of the training in preparation for ordination.

In 1972, Pope Paul VI changed this ruling. From then on, the office of lector or reader has been one of the ministries of the Church, whereby men may be formally instituted to read the sacred scriptures in a liturgy. Women may perform the duties of a reader but they may not be formally instituted. In many places, those who are not instituted are formally commissioned in recognition of their ministry.

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## Scriptural Background

- The role of reader is vital. What is to be read is both in and “out of this world”. The power of the Word is extraordinary: it is living, active and bears God’s intentions (Isaiah 55: 10-11; Hebrews 4: 12). The Word of God is at the heart of Christian theology. Vatican II documents describe the Scriptures as a lavish feast to nourish the faithful.
- Christ is present in his Word. It is he who speaks in the assembly. St Augustine said: “The Gospel is Christ’s mouth. He sits in heaven and does not cease to speak on earth.” The reader is the one who will make God’s Word come alive.
- The reader has the task of telling the story of salvation.
- The Scriptures are the written memory of God’s people, in a sense the Christian “family” story. Without memory, we would not know who we are, our identity would be lost.
- Readers have to proclaim the Scriptures. One challenge is to “re-enflesh the dry bones” of stories that, having been read regularly in the same format for nearly thirty years, are almost scriptural clichés. They “proclaim” in the sense of calling out, summoning listeners, and bringing the good news with authority. Hebrew *dabar* [word] means a message, a communication or a profound event (an event that *said* something). Jesus is the *dabar* of God: the significant event of God’s becoming human on earth. *Dabar* is the living, active Word and it must be communicated with authority and power.
- Readers proclaim a Word that heals, comforts and consoles.
- They proclaim a Word which challenges, confronts and captures hearts.
- Readers require scriptural preparation. It is therefore important to:
  - have an attitude of awesome reverence for God’s Word.
  - understand the style of writing of the passage.
  - know the context of the passages that are to be read.

There are many different resources available that provide an introduction to the different styles of writing found in the Scriptures, as well as offering pronunciation guides and insights into the meaning of the texts. They also help the reader to prepare well through spiritual formation.

## Liturgical Background

Proclaiming God’s Word unites God, reader and listener in a similar way as reception of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine unite the faithful to God and each other. Proclamation of the Word transforms the individuals present into the assembly, congregation, the faithful called by God, gathered into one.

The Liturgy of the Word is the most important means in the Christian liturgical tradition to connect Scripture to experience. The reader can provide space for God’s intimate meeting with the faithful in moments of reflective silence after each reading.

The proclamation of the Word of God is the responsibility of the baptised, though readers have the special task of transmitting the Word of God clearly to the assembly. Anyone can read the Scriptures in public; only the believer can proclaim them.

The ministry of reader, conferred through a liturgical rite, is a “proper function in the Eucharistic celebration” and should be exercised whether or not higher ranking ministers, such as bishops, a number of priests and deacons, are present.

Readers may be given the responsibilities of assisting in planning the Liturgy of the Word and are encouraged to work with their homilist. Readers “set the scene” for the homily and the Eucharistic Prayer, where the assembly gives thanks and praise for God’s goodness.

If there is more than one reading, different readers should be assigned. A variety of readers allows for differences of age, gender, culture and accents, an important symbol in a modern church: no one group has a monopoly of the Word.

The Book of the Gospels is an object of beauty, and may be borne into the assembly in procession. It is given a resting place at the ambo (lectern), or altar where it is enthroned, elevated for veneration, and surrounded with candles in order to prepare a fragrant path for the Word of Jesus Christ.

Readers need to handle the book of God’s Word with great care: it is a tabernacle of the Lord’s presence.

## Some Hints for Readers

- Discover where the sense of the whole passage and individual sentences lie.
- Do not read over-dramatically. Not even a good actor does that. Read intelligently, animatedly, and – where indicated, conversationally.
- Read slowly and clearly, and maintain the flow of the passage.
- Different materials require different treatment. The outbursts of the prophets need to be read with feeling, the rebukes of Paul with regret, and the poetry of the Song of Songs with passion.
- Verbs are more important than adverbs, nouns more important than adjectives. Let the stress fall on verbs and nouns, not their helpers.
- Well used pauses can create visual and audible spaces: for reflection, to change the established pace, to show respect and to heighten interest.
- Silence after the First and Second Readings is important to give an opportunity for the Word of God to engage with each person.
- The secret of a successful reader is practice, much practice. Reading aloud is a very different skill from reading silently and this will require practice.

## Technical Background

Both men and women who are inspired by the spirit of the liturgy may be invited to become readers. Ideally, readers:

- have devotion and decorum;
- can communicate a sense of prayerfulness;
- have presence, self-possession, confidence, maturity, poise and sensitivity to the range of people in the assembly;
- have good communication techniques, by conveying warmth, gaining / maintaining attention and motivating;
- can teach and inspire; so that the Word of God can become active in their lives and they can be instruments God can use to accomplish the divine will.

Readers need to approach the ambo, the table of the Lord's Word, as they would the Lord: with reverence and awe. Where possible, they leave their seats, near the central aisle, bow to the altar, a symbol of Christ, and move in a composed, unhurried and dignified way to the

ambo. They find their reading and wait until the assembly is settled before beginning to read. It is helpful for readers to let the Lord's peace settle in their heart, that their voice may be clear and steady.

The readings must be celebrated in a way that encourages meditation. Any sort of haste that hinders reflection should be avoided. The dialogue between God and God's people taking place through the Holy Spirit demands short intervals of silence. This gives an opportunity for the assembly to take the Word of God to heart, and to prepare a response to it in prayer. Times for silence during the Liturgy of the Word (for readers) are after the First and Second Readings.

## Liturgical communication is the interaction of language and paralanguage.

### *Language*

Correct pronunciation and obeying punctuation marks are only part of proclaiming so as to reveal the meaning of the text.

Reading well is an art form. Readers aim to engage the whole person, mind, body, spirit, emotions, memory, imagination – thus promoting “full, conscious and active participation” of the faithful (SC14).

### *Paralanguage*

- Includes body movement, gesture, voice, pace and pitch.
- Move to the ambo with dignity.
- Use eye-contact to engage members of the assembly.
- Wait for silence before beginning to read. Read confidently with appropriate tone and pacing for the particular style of writing (e.g. prophecy, psalm, exhortation, poetry), while making effective use of facial expression and voice inflection. Establish rapport / contact between reader and assembly members. Proclamation needs to be directed towards the individual in the assembly, and in a style that is audible, clear and intelligent.
- Always be open to honest criticism. Learn from others how they might proclaim a particular passage.
- Before the liturgy begins, check that the sound system is functioning. Adjust the microphone to an appropriate height.

## Six Tips for Readers

- **Pray** and regularly read the scriptures. Pray, asking the Spirit to open listeners' hearts to what readers proclaim.
- **Prepare** by prayerful reading of, and reflection on, the passages in context, then perhaps consultation with commentaries such as *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* or *Break Open the Word*.
- **Practise** aloud and frequently, with a critical friend if possible. Readers should never read publicly what they have not first read privately.
- **Proclaim**.
- Pause after the first and second readings, to allow for **meditation** on what has been heard.
- **Put into practice** God's "message" (i.e. be a doer of the Word).

## Resources

Useful books to assist readers in their ministry are:

Brown, R.E., Fitzmyer, J.A. and Murphy, R.E. (eds). *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Bath: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989.

Liturgy Brisbane. *Break Open the Word*. Brisbane: The Liturgical Commission, for Years A, B, and C.

Rosser, A.R. *A Well-Trained Tongue*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996.

Trainor, Michael. *Befriending the Text: a beginner's guide to the Bible*. Adelaide: Collins / Dove, 1991.

University of Notre Dame, *Pastoral Liturgy: Formation and resources for Lectionary-Based Worship*, Australia.

Zimmerman, J.A. et al., *Living Liturgy: Spirituality, Celebration and Catechesis for Sundays and Solemnities*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, published each year in paperback and eBook.

