

Reading the Bible in Church

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Your aim is to read in a way that will help others to listen.

BEFORE THE DAY

Read the passage aloud, several times, preferably in the church - at least before your debut. Bring a friend to listen to you and to be willing to comment frankly. Record yourself from the back of church. Hear yourself as others hear you.

Read much more slowly than you expect, and more deliberately, even if your nerves urge you to get it over - but don't labour it.

Work out the meaning of the passage in its context, and as part of the service. Some texts are difficult, even more so in the older translations. Consult a commentary.

Decide which words to stress to stimulate interest and imagination. Work out where to pause, and what ideas balance or are contrasted. Use higher and lower tones and inflect your voice with restraint to create suspense and interest. But don't gild the lily. Attract attention to the reading, not to the reader.

Consider printing out your own copy of the reading, using larger print and extra space between the lines. You can then mark your copy, underlining words that need emphasis, indicating pauses, and highlighting the climax of the passage.

In your notes you can also decode any awkward names, and make changes to the text, e.g. replacing a pronoun with a person's name especially at the beginning, or putting "Jesus said to..." before a quotation.

Check the height of the lectern in church. Adjust it if possible so as to see and be seen. If you have to look down to read from the lectern Bible, abandon it in favour of your own Bible or a printed script - as suggested above. You need to be able to look at the text and look at the back of the church just by moving your eyes - without moving your head. Spectacle-wearers beware - especially if you have varifocal lenses!

Except in an emergency, don't agree to read without proper notice!

ON THE DAY

Arrive at the church in good time. If you are not bringing your own copy of the Bible or a printed script, check the version of the Bible provided, and that the place is marked.

Check that the microphone is working and that you know how to switch it on and off. You'll need it as close as possible to your mouth.

Sit where you can get out easily and reach the lectern in good time. Pray for yourself and your hearers. Know who or what you are following. During singing (not during a prayer) walk - don't rush - to the lectern.

Pause before starting to read - until the congregation is settled in their seats (or standing for the Gospel at Communion). During this pause, relax your shoulders, breathe deeply and stand up straight. If the reading goes onto the next page, put a finger or marker in place to avoid an awkward pause.

Introduce the passage - have the reference written down if you think you may need it. "The Epistle/Lesson is written in the Letter / Book / Gospel of..., chapter... beginning at verse ... (and maybe add "on page ... of the pew bible"), and pause to let it be found.

Read clearly, confidently, aiming at the back pew. Pronounce final letters. Don't let your voice drop at the end of a sentence. Try to scan the text ahead so that you can look up and read a complete phrase looking at (different) people in the congregation. Run a finger down the margin to keep your place.

Be yourself. Use your own accent. Be dressed tidily. If you make a slip, either carry on if the meaning is still clear - most people won't notice - or start the phrase or sentence again.

Don't be afraid of pauses, for instance at the end of paragraphs and especially at the end of the passage. As on the printed page, words stand out in space. At the end of the reading, give people enough time to digest the meaning of what they have heard before saying "This is the Word of the Lord" or "Here ends the Lesson".

As far as you can, read with understanding and belief. Your sincerity will be sensed by your hearers.