

Proclamation Techniques

Our goal as lectors is to make God's word come alive with meaning for God's people, to make it alive and transforming for them and for us.

Sometimes we may think of ourselves as separate and distinct from the gathered assembly by virtue of our roles as liturgical ministers, but, we are not, we are part of the assembly and ideally we should be sitting within the assembly. Even the presider, is first and foremost, a member of the assembly; he exercises his role as leader of the assembly's prayer from the presider's chair, ambo or altar. Whenever he is not in this role, he is a member of the assembly.

During the first and second readings, the lector is the leader of the assembly. All are recipients of God's spoken word. That word is spoken to and for the presider as much as to the rest of us. Presumably, the lector (or the priest or deacon in the case of the gospel) has studied it in advance. Still, as it is proclaimed, the word sounds anew. The word is living and can be heard differently each time. There are always new insights and inspirations to be gained. The word is new and fresh, a living word proclaimed by the living lector, and given new life each time.

Our role as lector is a ministry. Ministry is service to God's people. This role is not a cause for pride in our ability or an opportunity to "shine." It is a cause for humility because God, through God's church, has called us to speak in God's name, proclaiming God's truth and story. If we find that we feel unworthy of this role then we are a bit like the prophets of the Old Testament, who were called to speak in God's name but did not always feel up to the task. Nonetheless, they experienced the urgency of the call. Humility is to be experienced as a posture of honesty before God, acknowledging our gifts in gratitude to the One who has given them.

Our proclamation of the word takes place in the midst of the assembly and is in service to it. Our ministry derives its purpose and goal from the assembly. Without the assembly, there is no need for the ministry of lector.

Preparation

Serious preparation is necessary to fulfill our ministry well. The three primary elements of preparing to lector are training, study, and practice. There are last minute details. Training is the long-term preparation we do to get ready for your ministry. Study is more specific to the particular reading we are preparing to proclaim. Practice is what we should be doing the entire week before we are scheduled to lector.

Training

Training is long-term preparation. Some churches in El Paso schedule annual training sessions for liturgical ministers. Tepeyac Institute offers this course we are now participating in and requires that we attend a renewal course every three years. We should make every attempt possible to attend any training offered at the parish or diocesan level.

Study

Part of our task as lector is to interpret the readings. How we use our voice will cause the meaning of a reading to be brought out in a specific way. Sometimes it is difficult to understand the meaning especially in some of the Old Testament readings. Reading the verses in Scripture, that precede and that follow a reading, can make the context clearer to us. It is also useful to read commentaries. This gives us the benefit of learning from experts.

When studying the readings, it is important to understand them in various contexts: what people have heard the week or weeks before, what they will hear in the following weeks, and in relationship to the other readings for this week. Be sure to look at the psalm as well; this may also help us understand what needs to be emphasized.

Not all the readings will be proclaimed in the same way, in the same tone of voice, or at the same volume. The readings contain stories, prophecy, poetry, laws, letters, proverbs, parables, and visions. Depending on the mood and meaning, the readings will need to be proclaimed in different ways. More than words need to be communicated in the proclamation.

There are many different types of writings within the Scriptures, each with its own style of proclamation but all needing to express divine passion for the people of God.

A lector's workbook is a great tool. It lays out the reading as we will see it in the lectionary. It gives some background, context and pronunciation hints. It gives proclamations suggestions, italicizing words that are "supposed" to be emphasized.

An essential part of our preparation is making sure we know how to pronounce not only the names and other difficult words peculiar to Scripture but also words from our normal vocabulary that we might stumble over. Mispronunciations are distracting.

Practice

Practice is what will enable us to change a reading to a proclamation. What is a "proclamation"? How is it different from a "reading"? One important difference between reading and proclamation is that the proclamation is our faith witness, just as the Scriptures are the faith witness of the people of the time. Proclamation implies that we have delved deeply into the meaning of the reading, prayed with it, and gained insight as to its meaning both for ourselves and for the community we serve. What does God wish to convey to this community at this time? To learn this, we must make an effort to understand the community as well as the Scripture itself.

Familiarity with the specific reading will enable this faith witness in our proclamation. It will make it easier for us to make the meaning clear to our audience. It will help us make the reading sound as though it is being spoken specifically to them. It will help them hear it that way. It will draw the listeners into Scriptures.

In order to do this, we must become immersed in the reading. We must understand the characters and their motivation; we must know the story and its context and we must be able to express this through tone, inflection, tempo, volume and style. These are things to consider when we practice. However, we must practice enough so that these things become an integral part of our relationship to the reading. Then, when we proclaim the reading we will communicate unselfconsciously. (God proclaims through us.)

Become intimately familiar with the reading. This does not mean we should memorize it. However, we should be able to tell someone in our own words what the reading is about and how the content unfolds in the course of the excerpt. This will help us free ourselves from the need to look at the book constantly while we are reading.

Practice reading out loud. The words we speak are important to the life of the community. We must make sure that all can hear and understand. Read each sentence a number of different ways, placing emphasis on a different word each time. Even if we have a lector's workbook, we may find that a different emphasis works best for us.

Emphasis

Besides emphasizing specific words within each sentence, we want to identify the part of each reading that is the most important. It may not be the same sentence every time we read it. Determine which sentence seems most important on this occasion, then emphasize it. Emphasizing a word generally requires that we put more stress on that word. In order to emphasize a thought or sentence, read it more slowly than the rest of the reading. This also helps to highlight the sentence and still emphasize the particular word within the sentence. In addition, we can set a sentence off from the rest of the reading with a pause before we begin the sentence and following it. This cues our listeners to be particularly attentive because something important is coming and has just been said.

Tempo

In the course of the reading, we may use different tempos, especially if it is a narrative story. We can set off the actual narrative from the parts spoken by the characters by giving them a different cadence and tempo to communicate the feelings of the character. This will help the story come alive for our listeners. It will make it more interesting and communicate the varying importance of the different parts of the reading.

Eye Contact

One way to convey that we are telling a story instead of reading it is to use eye contact. When we come up to the ambo, we verify that the lectionary is open to your reading. When we are ready, we look at the assembly. We let our gaze move from one side to the other, including everyone and encouraging them to look at us. If people are coming in late, we wait for them to be seated. In this way, we make sure the assembly is ready to hear our reading. This is an act of hospitality. Then we look down to the reading that we know so well, get the first sense line in our mind, and look up to proclaim it. We speak slowly and distinctly.

Conviction

Remember that we are speaking God's word to the people in front of us. We need to let them know we are speaking to them. This is not a performance. This is a heart-to-heart faith witness of the word that we have studied and prayed. Our conviction should be obvious, and it should convince our listeners that we believe what we are saying, we believe that it is important, and that we believe that it is important for them to hear and understand. We should convey a sense of urgency.

Energy

Communicating our conviction requires energy. Many times lectors (and some priests) stand close to the microphone, speak quietly, and expect that the microphone will amplify them. Which it will. However, what it amplifies is a quiet little voice without energy. We need energy to carry out our conviction, stir the hearts of our listeners, and let them know that what we say is important for them. Don't depend on the microphone. Project your voice to the person in the last pew. Our eagerness to have them hear us must be obvious. If our voice is too loud for the microphone, we back away from it. We must let God's word ring throughout the building. Even without the microphone, we should be able to hear our own voice bouncing off the back wall. People shouldn't have to strain to hear us. Energy is one of our most important tools.

Inflection

When we are working on making readings intelligible to the community, our use of inflection will make a difference. We all look for these audible clues to meaning in everyday speech. When the tone goes up at the end of a sentence, we understand it as a question. When the tone drops, we know we're at the end of a sentence.

Movement

How we move is important. When it's time to go up for the reading, we stand up and let our posture carry conviction and authority. While this is not a time to show personal pride, it is a time to express the importance of our ministry. This should be obvious in the way we carry ourselves as we go to the ambo. Moving quickly is distracting and communicates undesirable messages, perhaps insecurity or self-consciousness. Our carriage should demonstrate confidence. What we are about to do is important. We will speak God's word to God's people. Our walk and stance should reflect this. We bow with reverence to the altar.

Silence

Allow for some silence before you begin the reading. Another type of silence is the pause during the reading that sets off the important messages of the reading. This is a briefer period of silence. Once in a while, because of the nature of the narrative, it helps to put a very brief pause between sections to set up a change of scene or mood. This might be just a deeper, slower breath.

At the end of the reading, we should pause briefly before saying, "The word of the Lord." This also calls attention to the importance of what we are going to say. These words should be proclaimed with the same energy as the rest of the reading. It should carry sufficient conviction to invite the people's response, "Thanks be to God."

After the people have voiced their, "Thanks be to God," we don't move except to bow your head. We don't move away from the ambo. We don't turn the page. We don't move the ribbon. We model the reflectiveness into which the people are invited at his time. How long should this period of silence be? Try as long as it takes to say the "Glory Be." When the time seems right, we move the ribbon, we close the book, or we do whatever is necessary to prepare for the next part, and return to your seat. If we don't move, we don't pull people out of their reflective mode and start them thinking about the next part of the liturgy.