



Diocese of Monmouth · Esgobaeth Mynwy

Diocesan Office, 64 Caerau Road, Newport, NP20 4HJ
01633 267490 · monmouth.churchinwales.org.uk

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Worship Leader

Session 2 – Group Course

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Session 2: The Bible in worship

Introductory Reading

The scriptures are at the heart of our faith. We believe them to be the Word of God. We believe them to be inspired and we understand that the scriptures shape and form the consciousness and character of our Christian communities and the individuals within it.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we read,

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Growing as disciples in Christ therefore requires a lengthy and ongoing encounter with the text of scripture that challenges us, guides us and leads us into truth.

Although all Christians are encouraged to read the scriptures regularly at home, it is right to recognise that many people only encounter the scriptures when they hear the Bible read during Christian worship. This makes the liturgical encounter with scripture of great importance. The Lectionary provides bible readings for all public worship on both Sundays and weekdays. These are selected to support the different church seasons (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week and Easter and the Sundays after Trinity).

The Church has used sets of readings following this pattern since the fourth century and the Church in Wales' Lectionary (sometimes called the Almanac) is based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) which is used by most denominations in the world today. This means that, on any particular Sunday, many millions of Christians across the world will be listening and responding to the same scriptures.

You can view the lectionary on the Church in Wales' website¹. It follows a three-year cycle and each year focusses on one of the three synoptic gospels. Year A features Matthew, Year B features Mark and Year C features Luke. John's Gospel is used every year in the period before and after Easter and on other Festivals, including Christmas. The Lectionary encourages the continuous reading of scripture from Sunday to Sunday and lessons are selected for use with whichever form of service

¹ Available at <https://www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/publications/>



the church uses. Hence readings are provided for the Principal Service in church that day, be it a Eucharist, Morning Prayer or a Family Service. Readings are then provided for a Second and Third service. Churches with evening services normally use the readings for the Second Service.

Over the years concerns have been expressed about the fact that the Old Testament has not been heard regularly in worship. This is because a large number of churches have traditionally read only an Epistle and Gospel during the Eucharist. This has arguably led to a decline in the congregations' knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament. However, this omission has now been addressed by most churches and the Lectionary provides both continuous and related readings each Sunday for the Old Testament, the latter being chosen to fit into the broad themes chosen for that Sunday which are reflected in the Epistle and Gospel.

Reading scripture regularly in our worship not only helps to form us as disciples of Jesus Christ, it also helps us to understand God's saving work in the creation and redemption of the world. Through hearing scripture, we will gain a better appreciation of the significant people who have shaped our faith and we will become more aware of the historical and cultural contexts in which our faith has developed and grown. We will become familiar with the life and teachings of Jesus who is the Word of God and we will learn to recognise the action of the Holy Spirit who leads us into truth.

However, because scripture is so central to our worship as a Christian community it needs to be presented in a way that will help the congregation to fully engage with its meaning. Therefore, it will be important to read from a version that best portrays its meaning and in a way that presents the message in the best possible way to the people who are present.

Scripture is written in a number of different literary forms. There is history, law, prayer, prophecy, poetry, liturgy, letters and gospels that each tell the story of salvation in different ways. There are a number of different strategies employed by different writers to make their point from storytelling to closely worded argument and these reflect a wide range of emotions. These factors will all affect the way that the scripture is read in church.

Practical issues are important. In the past people who read lessons in church needed to project their voices so that they could be heard throughout the building. This did not just require a loud voice but clear diction and a requirement to project



the voice effectively. Today many church have microphones. However, using a microphone isn't straightforward and mistakes are common. It is not unusual for readers to begin reading their lesson without turning the microphone on. Others fail to speak into the microphone effectively or speak loud enough to make themselves heard. Practising with the system does make sense.

It is important that the books of the Bible are introduced correctly. It is normal to announce the reading by saying, 'A reading from the Book of ...', and sometimes including the exact reference, eg. 'chapter ... starting at verse ...' Sometimes the readings are printed on a weekly sheet, but if churches have pew bibles it might help to announce the page number and pause for the congregation to find the page. If you are reading two lessons together, it is good practice to leave a pause in between for people to turn to the next one.

If you want to introduce individual books by their full titles, be careful. Most of Paul's letters are named after the place that they were sent to – so Thessalonians is the letter he sent to the church in Thessalonica, Colossians to Colossae etc. However, some of his letters were sent to individuals like Timothy, Titus or Philemon. James, Peter, John and Jude wrote their own letters so they are *not* the letter of Paul to Peter etc.

Nobody knows who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, so that is normally introduced simply as 'The letter to the Hebrews'. Lessons in Morning and Evening prayer are traditionally concluded by saying 'Here ends the first/second lesson' (with no response from the congregation). In Eucharistic worship, the Old Testament and New Testament readings are concluded with either, 'This is the Word of the Lord' or, 'Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church' and the congregation respond, 'Thanks be to God'. At the Eucharist the Gospel is introduced and concluded with its own set of responses.

It is also important to recognise that reading in church is a performance. Remember that the scriptures were written originally to be read out loud during worship and not to be read privately at home. Unfortunately, extremes are common. Often the scripture is read in a monotonous tone or, on rarer occasions, is read in an over-dramatic way. A failure to pause appropriately, to vary the strength of the voice and to emphasise certain words and phrases will often rob the reading of its power and energy. Also, too many readings in church are unprepared. In fact, the impact of reading the scriptures to the best of our ability and after proper preparation is often underestimated.



Scripture can be communicated in a number of different ways. Dramatised bibles are now common and are easily available online. To present the scripture as a dramatic dialogue, with characters speaking from different locations in church can be refreshing. And of course, scripture can be presented as drama. Some more technically aware ministers occasionally present scripture against a visual backdrop which adds to the overall experience.

Hearing the Word of God is central to our Christian experience and our experience of worship. The more effectively and imaginatively scripture can be presented, the more telling the impact and the more effective the message that it brings.



Group Work Discussion

1. Gathering

Spend a few minutes in silence, offering any worries or concerns from everyday life to God, and acknowledging God's presence among you as you meet together.

**Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy scriptures
to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.**

2. Reflecting

In groups of 2-3, discuss your experiences, both good and bad, of hearing the Bible being read aloud.

- What did the reader do well? What could they have done better?
- How was the meaning and mood of the text communicated?
- How did their pace and tone of voice help?
- What about their posture and body language?

As a whole group, share your reflections together.



3. Exploring

Read the following passage from Galatians 1:1-10.

Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the brothers and sisters with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: if anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

In group of 2-3, discuss together:

- Consider how you would best read the reading in a service so as to convey its meaning and mood. Mark any words that you think need to be stressed. Mark any places you will pause or breathe.
- Consider the pace and expression with which you will read different parts of the reading and mark the text accordingly.



Come back together as a whole group and ask for a couple of people to volunteer to read the passage — drawing on the insights from your discussion together.

After each person has read, share some constructive feedback.

Consider these questions:

- What did the reader do well?
- What could be improved?
- Was the reading audible?
- Was the pace and tone of voice appropriate?
- Was the reader's posture and body language appropriate?
- How was the meaning and mood of the text communicated?

4. Responding and Concluding

- a. Each share briefly one particular thing you have learned from this session.
- b. Plan your preparation for the next session.
- c. Finish by saying the Grace together, or some other form of prayer.

