

## Christian Prophet — Lectors

Messengers played a significant role in the ancient world. Centuries before our highly sophisticated communication systems, messengers alone connected various countries. Sometimes they played a role in delicate negotiations. Before writing and reading were usual, messengers memorized proposals and delivered them as they were spoken to them. Messengers were not authors, nor responsible for discussing what messages contained. They were mailmen who voiced their letters.

The Middle Ages introduced another kind of messenger. Their purpose was more artistic than informational. They were called rhapsodes. Their art shown by interpreting a written text to allow the feeling and experiential element to come through. It was not merely flat information. They competed in entertainment events for best performances. One restriction placed upon rhapsodes: like ancient messengers, their role forbade them to change textual wording. Unlike the messengers, they were called upon to expand meaning by how they delivered the words. These men and their techniques grew into the art of oral interpretation. This art form amplifies what an author intends by reading their written work out loud. The written word becomes translated into the oral word, with all its benefits and limitations.

Prophets acted as messengers on the pages of Scripture. They announced what was given them — messages derived from a most unique source. Their calling drew them to proclaim the Word of God to the nation of Israel. Chosen personalities, prophets responded often with some measure of resistance. That call often came as a shock. Their role played out as a charismatic one, imparted mysteriously by the Spirit. Described often as people set apart by the Spirit, they lived differently from the ordinary run of people. Prophets are raised up as mediators between the human and the Divine. They demonstrate the difference between charism and office. Office suggests an appointed position. Those who fill official roles. Priests and Levites carried out official functions. Chosen by birth, their role in the Temple was passed down from father to son. Office suggests a force descending — passed down rather than rising up. Both charism and office carry the force of authority, whether passed down or risen up.

The life of Jesus, as the Gospels portray it, traces a ministry begun as healer, later as messenger. As healer, he drew crowds. People came with various needs. Jesus used these opportunities to begin preaching. His words became like nothing they had ever heard. Those who came for healing now came to hear what the man from Nazareth was saying. He showed himself unafraid to challenge leaders. He confronted aspects of belief others never questioned. Privately and in public, he made clear his words were not his own. He was a messenger sent to preach what the Father had given him. The message began with the Father, then to the Son, while the Spirit would support his followers, continuing his tradition. For followers unsure of what was expected of them, the Lord assures them: “When the hour comes, you will be given what you are to say. You yourself will not be the speakers: the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you”

(Matthew 10: 20). Their job was to carry and proclaim the message, not create it. They were to represent a Christian and prophetic tradition to the next generation.

Jesus as messenger overflows into various Gospels. John's Gospel specifically points to him as a messenger come down from the Father to announce the Word of God. Other Gospels picture him as son of a carpenter risen up to announce the coming of the kingdom of God. What establishes his uniqueness and sets him apart from other prophets is he not only speaks the message, he is the message. As Word enfleshed in human life, he expresses a Word made visible as well as a Word translated into words.

Eucharistic Ministers occupy a spiritual function, feeding the faith community with the Sacramental Presence. Lector feed hearers of the Word with the Word of God. Both break the bread of the Word to nourish those designated by Baptism as both hearers and consumers of a Word made language and a Word made Eucharist. Both rituals link the Church to its Jewish roots, to synagogue or Temple. The message and its conveyance becomes first in order of priority and through the Liturgy of the Word forms the first feeding. As feeding agents, Lectors meditate what appears in a text before them. They lift that text from a book and distributing it to the congregation, piece by piece and phrase by phrase. They break the bread of the Word, not in individual wafers but in units of meaning.

Lectors contribute a personal atmosphere to Divine Revelation. They flesh out the Word by human proclamation. The text passes to listeners through a human voice. Scripture returns to its original setting as oral words once preached, enacting a vibrant age before the Word settled into a written text. Lectors offer an opportunity for fresh feelings toward Biblical passages heard many times before. Like prophets, they announce once more, "Thus says the Lord." They believe the Word they speak alive, powerful, and attempt to share with listeners an eternal message, feeding people's deeper convictions.

"Announce," a term used a few times to describe pulpit reading. A term deliberately chosen to distinguish between a reading and an announcement. An announcement is forceful. It carries something urgent. It resembles directing people to the nearest exit while a fire is raging. Spoken, it looks to grab and hold attention. From the pulpit, it aspires to make the text a Word event. Therefore, a first task for Lectors is to animate a text that sits asleep in a book. Wake it up and distribute it alive to a waiting congregation. Announce it, proclaim it as an act of prophetic power and authority. Lectors walk humbly to pulpits to answer temporarily the question of who speaks for God. Standing in the pulpit looking down at people, they share prophetic power. A power bestowed to wrestle with the wanderings of human distractions. Which needs not only dynamic expression but also making people feel looked at. The text should take visual aim at a congregation rather than become fixed in the book. How difficult it is to pay attention to people who talk to us while looking elsewhere. Lifting the text implies person-to-person connection, which means the Lector must also get out of the book. People should feel you saying: "Yes, I am looking at you and talking to you."

Such contact creates a moment when faith becomes shared at a much more personal level.

Eucharistic bread, when presented, is held up between the Minister and those receiving. Scripture texts also should be lifted up between the Lector and congregation. Good proclamations highlight the text rather than its messenger. But needed still is an expression of faith. In days when I trained men before Ordination to celebrate the Eucharistic Liturgy, I would say: "Make me believe you believe." In proclamation, hesitation can set in because one does not feel one is being oneself in the pulpit. On such occasions, I have needed to remind Lectors the words they are speaking are not their own. Servants of the Word must recognize what the Word is asking and attempt to join together what proclaimed with how it is proclaimed. The how comes from the what and not the other way around. We do not impose on a text how we are going to announce it but ask what the text itself is asking of us. This "how" is the essence of what Lectors do: they help interpret the Scriptural reading by how they speak it.

## Addenda

Since Lectors are responsible for the how of a text, needs may surface to point to another how: how to bring about some of these things? First, the basic principle of interpretive reading is the interchange of sound and silence. And arranging that relationship so that it takes place meaningfully. This notion lies within the spiritual context of the breaking of the Word. The text must be broken into parts, as bread must be broken into pieces so that it may be digested. If one shoves the entire loaf into someone's mouth, chances of digesting it become minimal. Many readings resemble too much bread jammed down a listener's throat all at once. No time given for digestion. Help comes from the placements of silence. A text must be broken up into units of meaning by the use of the pause. Pausing not merely because of commas, periods, or to catch one's breath. Units stand a better chance of becoming meaningful when we are able to take in, chew, and digest. For example, A Reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans becomes broken up into: A Reading / from the Letter / of St. Paul / to the Romans. Thus we may digest: first, a text is going to be read aloud to us. What kind of a text? It will be in the form of a letter. Who is the letter from? St. Paul. To whom was it sent? To the Romans. One announcement, consisting of four parts. To distinguish the four parts makes the general concept easier to grasp. The silent pause makes that separation possible. It separates into phrases that may convey meaning we can more easily swallow.

Second, each phrase has a word more important than the others. That word needs to be stressed to lead listeners to awareness of the priority of words in a unit. And so: A Reading / from the Letter / of St. Paul / to the Romans. Now indicated to listeners are words that carry extra importance in order to grasp the overall content of what is being

announced. Also implied, every word does not have the same importance, even in Scripture.

Third, speed is another characteristic used to bring out the overall meaning of a text. People by habit speak at different speeds. One major project consists of incorporating into your ordinary speed some variety. To emphasize a particular expression by slowing down the rate of speed you have been using. One example would be those texts where there is a narrator and textual characters. Narrators keep the flow moving while characters slow the flow down. Or, to use our introduction: A Reading / from the Letter / of St. Paul. / to the Romans. Various letters of St. Paul are read in church. What makes this one special is the audience to whom it is addressed. Therefore, to focus attention: use the pause, stress the important word, and change speed at significant parts.

These are simple suggestions on how to score a text. Some use it for preparation only while others print out the text and bring the scored paper into the pulpit. That choice is up to the individual Lector. One more added point: your voice is needed to communicate to a congregation what is buried in a text. Listen to your own voice. Recognize it and find ways to use it more expressively. Those who have a dictation device on their computers should spend time listening to their own proclamations. One may have few years functioning as a Lector but one has more years sitting in a congregation. How would you react as a listener to your own proclamation?

And lastly, an appeal for humility. One really begins as a Lector or preacher with the admission that we too can become boring. All the boredom we have suffered in a classroom or in church pews also lies within ourselves. Proclamation, as preaching, is work. We need to capture people's attention before it wanders away. Years of boredom in church have set people up to expect boredom. We fight an uphill battle. And battle it is. At first, our anxieties suspect people of paying close attention to us. Which appearances may tell us but where is their mind located? Therefore, the need to bring a spirit of importance and urgency to our task. But attempt to do it with good taste. Good taste demands preparation and a spirit of growth so that our proclamations get better the more we do them. We do not need shouting but animation — hinting that as Lectors, we believe this text is important. Again, to take as a motto: "Make me believe you believe."

**Amen, Amen**

A warm thank you for your generosity in volunteering your time for these special ministries. May the Lord bless you for coming forward to accept this enlargement of your Baptismal calling.

**Fr. Emeric Meier**

