THE ART OF READING

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In the mid nineties I participated in a Roman Catholic liturgical conference at a seminary in Northumberland. I was attracted to a workshop entitled, *Proclaiming the Word* which was to be led by an African-American woman named Marion Tolley. I was very keen to hear what she had to say about preaching to a disparate group of hard-bitten priests and timorous lay people. It came as a surprise therefore to discover that she was not dealing with the preaching of the word, but the reading of it.

The need for readers was recognised in Scotland by the Lords of the Congregation in 1557 and became a feature of Reformed ecclesiastical polity soon afterwards. In 1560 Edinburgh town council not only paid a stipend to its minister, John Knox, but also to the reader John Cairns.

In the same year the Book of Discipline indicated that the three offices of minister, elder and deacon should, on a temporary basis, be supplemented by those of reader, exhorter and superintendent. Frequently the role of reader and exhorter were combined, and occasionally in the early days of the Church of Scotland, a minister who was not regarded as up to the mark could be demoted to either or both of these roles.

The principal function of the reader was, as the name suggests, to read. A church, let alone a school, had not been erected in every community; therefore illiteracy was high. As at present, ministers were fewer in number than the parishes. So literate men were employed to read prayers, scriptures and sermons as required. For this, they might receive an annual stipend ranging from £4.00 to over £20, this latter being a wage deemed suitable for ministers in the mid sixteenth century.[1]

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the role of the reader became increasingly taken up with providing pulpit supply. He or she was therefore expected not only to read the scripture, but also to lead the service which invariably involved

1 For further allusions to the Readership in the post-reformation era, see *Patterns of Reform* by James Kirk (T&T Clark 1989)

producing both prayers and sermon. More recently, and perhaps encouraged by decisions on the role of the laity in sacred liturgy taken by Vatican II, even conservative Presbyterian churches have allowed lay people, who have not been commissioned as readers, to lead corporate prayer and to read the scriptures.

This latter is what Marion Tolley was passionate about. In her home diocese in North Wales she had complained to the local bishop about the poor standard of reading the scriptures He, in reply, asked her to devise a course for local congregational readers to which he would give his endorsement.

Behind Marion's teaching on the subject were two convictions which I had never heard articulated in my own denomination despite our pride on being 'built on the word.'

The first was that the scriptures are interpreted not when the preacher takes to the pulpit, but when the sacred text is read aloud in public. She believed, as I do, that the act of reading is an offering to God as well as to the congregation. It is therefore important that this should be seen as a privilege rather than something which the 'duty' elder does, sometimes under duress, and often without rehearsal at home or *in situ*. There is something grossly disrespectful if 'the lively oracles of God' are articulated with the same enthusiasm as one might read a missive from the Inland Revenue regarding a fiscal underestimate.

Marion's second (and to me at first outrageous) claim was that for the time in which scripture is read, the reader is effectively the voice of God speaking to the ears of the children of God. She further added that if, from time to time the reader was so engaged with the scripture that she or he might occasionally look at the congregation, then for that moment the reader was like the eyes of God looking with compassion on the hearers.

Some years later I was working alongside Anna Carter Florence, a professor of homiletics in Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. She too, as a Presbyterian led workshops for laypeople in the art of reading the scripture. Having a background in speech and drama, she was more focussed on articulate delivery, but always began her classes by asking people to carefully reflect on a given text, in order to identify whether it involved direct speech, was a poem, a letter, a historical narrative or a proclamation; then to mark what was possible

to read in one breath, and to consider where a pause might enable effective comprehension.

Too often, as I worship in different churches it seems as if those chosen to read scripture are either amateur dramatic enthusiasts, teachers who are used to speaking in public, or individuals who have the least rustic accent and who speak loudly. If either of the aforementioned fulfil their role as a chore that needs no preparation rather than a privilege which requires an honouring of God and God's people, the hungry sheep may well look up and not be fed every bit as much as if the sermon has been ill-prepared and delivered without expectation of a good hearing.

Both the women I have cited had an approach to liturgical celebration which is seldom considered as important, namely that ministers or worship leaders should feel as much for the situation of the hearer as for their function as a speaker.

There is a devotional coda to this. Marion Tolley suggested to her all male priestly audience that if they believed that scripture should be read effectively, they should pray for God to reveal to them the unlikely people in their congregations who might best be able to proclaim it.

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