

A Workbook for Lectors

# **A WELL-TRAINED TONGUE**

*Ray Lonergan*

The Lord has given me a well-trained  
tongue that I might know how to speak to  
the weary a word that will rouse them.

ISAIAH 50:4

# The Word

The work of the lector and gospel reader is done within the liturgy of the word. As a reader, you should have a good sense of the nature and structure of this part of the Mass.

Those who first followed the way of Jesus were, like Jesus himself, Jews. All their lives they had been assembling to hear the word of God in their synagogues. They would go there to hear the reading of the Torah and of the prophets, and to sing psalms. Many continued to do this as followers of Jesus, as we see from Acts and the letters of Paul. They also met with other Christians on the first day of the week for the breaking of the bread, to listen to the scriptures and to pray. To the Torah and the prophets, they eventually added readings from the letters of the apostles and the gospel accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus.

As the church increased greatly in numbers, the structure of this liturgy became more elaborate. Its forms varied from one people to another, but nowhere did Christians abandon the steady reading of the Hebrew Bible along with the gospels, letters and all that we now call the New Testament. For centuries the local churches evolved their own schedule of readings. A common lectionary was established for Roman Catholics in the sixteenth century. Then, after Vatican II, this lectionary was expanded to include a three-year cycle of Sunday readings (and a two-year cycle of weekday readings during Ordinary Time).

But what is this liturgy of the word? It is a ritual way of listening to scripture, a way Christians learned from their parent faith, Judaism. In the public reading of our scriptures, we have found a way to do what any group does that holds something important in common. A family—at a reunion, at a funeral, at a birthday—tells stories. A tribe around the campfire tells stories. A town or parish celebrating an anniversary tells stories. Thus do human beings discover who they are. Thus do we receive that wisdom from our ancestors, and thus do we hand it on to our children. These stories are told again and again.

So through the weeks and years of our lives, our scriptures are read over and over again. They are not simply a history of our ancestors and of Jesus. Gradually we discover that this is our story being told. As individuals, the story tells of our lives. As a people—a Catholic community, a church—the

story tells of our common life. The reader is the community's storyteller and has a task: to make the community listen to what is being proclaimed.

All of us, members of that assembly that meets every Sunday to hear the scriptures read, have the responsibility of listening. That is not a skill acquired easily in a culture where the barrage of words never ceases. The reader then must exercise great skill to draw all into listening. It is a craft, an art even, that takes much practice. The material is nearly always rich, but it needs to live in the voice of a member of our church, one who is utterly convinced of its vitality. And that is where the liturgy of the word and the task of the reader transcend the image of storyteller (transcend, but do not render useless—readers *are* storytellers to the community). The reading of our scriptures in the liturgy must call for a response: The spoken "Thanks be to God" is to be a sign that our lives will be more and more shaped by the word of God.

The structure of the liturgy of the word has evolved over centuries. The several readings (three ordinarily on Sundays, two on other days) are separated by at least a few moments of reflection and silence. It is important that any sense of rushing be avoided. If the readings are done well, all will listen and will *need* a period for reflection afterwards.

Following the first reading, this silent time moves into a psalm which should, if at all possible, be sung.

After the second reading, the short silence leads to the preparation for the gospel: the sung acclamation, the standing of the assembly, procession, candles and perhaps incense.

The gospel is not followed by a silent time, but by the homily which reflects on these scripture readings in the light of this community. After the homily, though, the instructions do call for a silent period. This is sometimes followed by the creed. Finally, the liturgy of the word concludes with the general intercessions (prayers of the faithful).

Today, as the assembly, we are learning that we are not passive spectators, but active in our listening, reflection, psalmody, acclamation, intercession. As readers, we come forth from the assembly, never forgetting that it is only as good and active members there that we are worthy to serve others through the proclamation of our scriptures.

## II: Basic Communication Techniques



## **Introduction**

**The items in this section are the most basic elements of all communication— and therefore of all proclamation. These practices can help lectors make noticeable improvement quickly. They are truly the bases for all the other elements of the lector's ministry.**

**This is an especially important section for beginners because it creates a good foundation for the rest of the techniques. But the same material is important for all proclaimers. No matter how experienced you may be, you constantly need to remember the basics. Let these first units be a refresher in any program for experienced lectors. In New York City a story circulates about Geraldine Page, the actress. Although she has been a Broadway star for 20 years, she annually returns to her original training group to work on the most basic acting techniques. Don't be too proud to return often to home base and first principles.**

# Body Language

Before your voice is heard as a lector, you are seen. So before discussing the vocal elements of communication, we need to speak about the body. As you approach the lectern (ambo) and as you prepare to speak, your body is busy sending messages. The messages continue through your reading and even afterwards. This can't be avoided, but it can be to your advantage. Is the message given by your movement and your posture in harmony with the message you are proclaiming?

On the way to the lectern your body should be strong, certain, relaxed. Move with the authority of the task you have to accomplish. That is the source of the strength, of the certainty—and of the relaxation too. Your movement of itself demands respect and attention. It says that you care about what you are going to do and so others should care.

Intentions have a lot to do with the way we move—at any time. Your intention as you approach the lectern will shape a movement that has authority without tenseness.

Liturgy falls apart when it is rushed. Don't be in a hurry to start to the lectern. Don't rush on the way there. Before the first reading, the introductory rites have concluded. Let the assembly settle in. The pace here makes it clear that one thing is over and now we begin a new and important part of our prayer together.

At the lectern, the body needs strong relaxation. That may sound like a contradiction. Here "strong" means that the body shows you want to be there. This strength comes from the authority you have in doing what you want to do and have prepared to do. And thus comes the relaxation, the lack of tension, the ease with what you are doing. But relaxation is not casualness. Don't get them confused. Sometimes relaxation does mean a casual appearance. But that is for another time and place, a time when we want to say, "Time to take it easy. Nothing of great importance here. Relax." Here, at the lectern, you are anything but casual. Following are some physical considerations that may help you achieve "strong" relaxation.

- Both feet should be firmly planted on the floor. Putting the weight all on one foot destroys weight distribution and creates a feeling either of insecurity or of casualness ("It's not really that important"). Even when

the lectern hides the lower part of your body, the upper body and the voice itself will reflect this lack of good foundation.

- Hands may be placed on the lectern (never in pockets, for that conveys disinterest), but without leaning. The hands on the lectern, rather than at your sides, can create a pleasant, inviting picture and can help you relax. But remember that your weight is to be carried by those two firm feet, not by the hands or arms.
- Your body should be straight but not rigid. Think of your body—head to toe—as a straight line, perpendicular to the ground. Remember that relaxation comes from security in what you are doing, not from tricks with the posture. If your head leans forward toward the mike ahead of the body, this breaks the line of the perpendicular and creates an awkward, perhaps even arrogant impression.

Body language is a strong communicator. Let its message be one with your words.

1. Assume a casual position at the lectern (feet not planted, arms leaning on lectern) and deliver this reading to a group. Ask the group what attitude you communicated about the reading and about them (the assembly). Is this what a lector should communicate? If not, avoid casual body language.

**A reading from the book of the prophet Joel**

**Even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with your whole heart,  
with fasting, and weeping, and mourning;  
Rend your hearts, not your garments,  
and return to the Lord, your God.  
For gracious and merciful is he,  
slow to anger, rich in kindness,  
and relenting in punishment.  
Perhaps he will again relent  
and leave behind him a blessing,  
Offerings and libations  
for the Lord, your God.**

JI 2:12-14 (NAB)

2. Use this reading to help you find a mixture of relaxation and authority in your body language. Work on this by yourself or with a person who can honestly evaluate you. Remember that the “authority” needed comes from belief, confidence, being at home with the material.

**A reading from the book of the prophet Jonah**

**The word of the Lord came to Jonah saying: “Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and announce to it the message that I will tell you.” So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh, according to the Lord’s bidding. Now Nineveh was an enormously large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day’s walk announcing, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,” when the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.**

**When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out.**

Jon 3:1-5, 10 (NAB)

3. Critique the body language of three readers at various Sunday liturgies. Ask yourself what messages you receive from their body language. What did you see that you could use yourself? What that you would want to avoid? Be aware of unnecessary movement of feet, hands, body, head.



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4. Observe the body language of one or more persons speaking to a group about a subject that the speaker truly knows and cares about (e.g., Jacques Cousteau, Mother Teresa). Comment on the body language.
  
5. How do you leave the lectern? It seems to depend on how you did your job. Observe this in others. What is it that allows a person to move away with dignity, without intruding on the assembly's mood of reflection and yet without appearing to sneak away?

# Vocal Elements: Slowness

Basic lector training primarily involves communication techniques: use of the body, use of the voice. We begin now with the voice. In this and the three units which follow we are concerned that the lector speak slowly enough, loudly enough, clearly enough and directly enough.

Slowness for the lector means roughly half the speed of regular conversation. Slowness does not refer to the space between words. That will be covered later when we discuss pausing. Slowness is the rate of speaking, the time given to the words themselves. Think then of the words coming only half as rapidly as they do in your conversation.

This is necessary for several reasons. First, the environment. The spaces where lectors read vary greatly from intimate chapels to school auditoriums to gigantic basilicas. When the space is large, microphones are usually employed. What happens when you speak at ordinary, conversational speed over a microphone? In some areas of the room the sound will become jumbled and difficult to understand. This is true even with a good mike because of the resonance, the extra bouncing or echoing of sound as it comes from the speakers.

Even when the space is small enough to work without a mike, speed of delivery must be decreased in order to project to the entire room.

Second, slowness is demanded by the task itself. It is easy to speak quickly when the material is unimportant, but what happens when something really matters to us? Normally, when we are speaking of matters of great personal importance, we speak more carefully, more slowly, more intently. Especially if we are trying to affect others, we take time to make sure they are getting the message. Think about your speech when you:

- are trying to interest people in a story you have to tell
- want to get your listeners to appreciate and even be excited about the beauty of the words themselves, the images with which you speak
- want to give your support and encouragement through your speech
- want others to follow your line of argument

If we have the word of everlasting life, we can afford to take time.

All of these exercises are to be done off mike. Use, or imagine, a group of listeners.

1. Improvise and speak a short monologue giving your name, address, phone number, occupation and place of employment.
2. Speak of some moment of great personal involvement. Choose an experience that expressed some commitment that is very real to you, an experience that involved something you care deeply about. Do not write it down or outline it. (As you speak, you will notice that you want to pick the right words simply because this is so important to you and you want others to understand that and possibly become as involved as you are. What happens then when the words are already *given* as they are in the readings at Mass? You don't have to search for them, so it is quite possible to rush through unless you have let yourself become as involved in these words as you can be in your own. Then the slowness and care comes.)
3. Give a three-minute speech trying to convince others on an issue (e.g., to vote, to stop smoking). Pick and choose your words because you really want to win over the listeners. (This exercise is less personal than the last one. Here, the issue is what matters. As you speak, you will be checking with the listeners, watching to see what is getting across. The communication should occur in both directions. This also is true in reading scripture. Listening is as much an activity as speaking.)
4. Do the first exercise again, but this time as if speaking to people who have never heard of you before.

# Vocal Elements: Volume

After “Is it slow enough?” comes “Is it loud enough?” When we talk about loudness we are talking about two things: volume and projection.

Both volume and projection begin with a need for strong speaking from the diaphragm. The diaphragm is the partition separating the chest cavity from the abdominal cavity. When you take a deep breath, this area should distend. As you speak, the air will push the words out and the diaphragm will collapse.

When you come to the lectern (ambo), stand straight as described in the unit on body language. Take a good deep breath. Speak from the diaphragm. This way of breathing does not attract attention at all (short gasps for breath are what will attract attention and so distract from the reading). But this deep breathing is not only for the first sentence of the reading. It is to be the pattern throughout. You will be speaking in units that don't force you to run out of breath. Every breath you draw will expand the diaphragm so that your words will all have this power behind them.

Speaking from the throat or “from the neck up” without such full deep breathing, can do damage to the throat and vocal chords because the speech is not being supported by the diaphragm. (It's like lifting from the waist instead of bending the knees and using them as support—something gets hurt!) In addition, if the person speaks only from the neck up, the sound will usually carry only a short distance.

Important to your volume is the microphone. Several elements should be checked. Some mikes are multidirectional: they can pick up the voice at any angle. You can stand slightly to the side, your head can be higher or lower than the mike head, and your voice will still be picked up clearly. Other mikes are unidirectional: they will pick up sound from one direction only—usually straight on. If your head is to either side, higher or lower, the sound will not be heard properly.

Every mike is different. You must determine the distance your mouth must be from the head of the mike to get the correct amount of volume. It is an annoying barrier to communication when the voice is too soft to be understood. It is an equally annoying barrier when too loud. When your mouth is too close to the mike, the listeners tend to react to that loudness instead of to the words you are saying.

At the mike you must be especially careful with plosive sounds, those sounds that explode like *p*'s and *b*'s. Depending on your personal habits with these sounds, you may have to pull back a little when you say them so that they do not "pop" in the mike. You know from experience how distracting that popping can be.

The second aspect of loudness is projection. You must project to the last row, to the back of the space. Basically, this involves *having the intention* of reaching that area. Think in terms of throwing your voice in an arc to the back wall. This image is valid *with or without* a mike. If you can make someone in the rear of the room hear the good news, you are projecting.

You will be constantly aware of your projection if you are taking in the reactions of your listeners. This is a self-correcting mechanism. As you look at the listeners, especially those far off, what is *their* body language saying?

Be reminded that your task of projecting may be increased when the church is filled with people, especially when they are wearing bulky winter clothes. These bodies will tend to absorb more sound, and you will need to expend more effort to reach the people in the rear.

The reader who knows how to breathe and how to use the mike, who knows how to throw that arc to the very rear of the room, that reader has a quality of voice we can call "energy." The regard you have for the word itself is in the quality of the sound—the energy, that is—in your speaking. The sound itself has life and confidence.

# Vocal Elements: Articulation

When we are slow enough and loud enough, we can work on being clear and distinct enough—this is articulation.

Articulation particularly involves the pronunciation of the consonants with emphasis on the final consonants. In our conversation, we develop lazy habits: “Whadya doin’ tonighd?” instead of “What are you doing tonight?” Or: “Gimme a hand” for “Give me a hand.” In public speaking, a lack of articulation can destroy communication.

If we are truly proclaiming, we must make sure our listeners hear every sound that is necessary for them to get the good news. So we must take a little more care with our consonants, especially with some of the most common problem sounds.

This is not a book on speech, so it is not the time or place to launch into a dissertation of how sounds are formed. Let us just encourage you to differentiate between *d*’s and *r*’s, between *n*’s and *m*’s, between *g*’s and *k*’s.

A second articulation problem involves a tendency to drop the voice at the ends of sentences. In English, most declarative sentences end with a downward inflection. We must not confuse that with a decrease of energy or volume. If the voice just peters out at the end of a sentence, we may lose not only those final words but also the whole message. With proper breathing, you will not be running out of breath at the end of a sentence. The challenge then is to maintain volume and projection—the “energy” we spoke of—when using the natural downward inflection at the end of the sentence.

**Note:** This is not a book that can solve the serious speech problems that may surface in studying a unit on articulation. A person with such problems should consult a good speech teacher or a speech clinic. Such problems may be an indication that this person is not gifted as a lector.

1. Practice the following words aloud, taking special care to pronounce the *n* sound distinctly.

**now — one**

**noon — no — known**

**son — heaven — servant — anointed — sent —  
salvation**

**nation — numbered — new — Nazareth**

2. Again practice these words aloud, with the proper *m* sound.

**murmuring stream**

**muted music**

**mountain — mercy — Moses — Messiah — majesty**

**name — baptism — fragmentary — bridegroom —  
proclaim**

3. Now read the following combinations aloud, clearly differentiating between the *n* and *m* sounds.

**no — mow**

**nearer — mirror**

**new — mew**

**nay — may**

**neat — meat**

**sane — same**

**cane — came**

**lane — lame**

4. Clearly sound the following combinations so that they are easily differentiated.

**do — two**

**dray — tray**

**riddle — little**

**lid — lit**

**rid — rit**

**God — got**

**sinned — since**

**strayed — straight**

**guild — guilt**

5. Say aloud the following nonsense sounds, listening to the specific difference between the *g* and *k* sounds.

**gah - gay - gee - gay - gah - gaw - goo - gaw**

**kah - kay - kee - kay - kah - kaw - koo - kaw**

**glah - glay - glee - glay - glah - glaw - gloo - glaw**

**krah - kray - kree - kray - krah - kraw - kroo - kraw**



6. Now read aloud this letter of Paul to the Ephesians and check how well you are enunciating the consonants you've worked on in this unit.

**A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians**

**Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens! God chose us in him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love; he likewise predestined us through Christ Jesus to be adopted sons—such was his will and pleasure—that all might praise the glorious favor he has bestowed on us in his beloved.**

**In him we were chosen; for in the decree of God, who administers everything according to his will and counsel, we were predestined to praise his glory by being the first to hope in Christ.**

Eph 1:3-6, 11-12 (NAB)

# Eye Contact

So far our discussion of communication techniques has dealt with the body and the voice. Another important influence on communication is the use of the eyes. Even when we use the body well and the voice is loud and clear, with the words spoken slowly enough, we are not proclaiming the word if we have our heads buried in the lectionary. In real life, communication requires eye contact. Think of situations where you really need to communicate with others—to cheer them, warn them, accuse them—and you will realize that you need eye contact.

You are not reading to the assembly, you are proclaiming the scripture to them and demanding their personal involvement. This expectation of a response comes when you confront the listeners with your eyes. How often have you heard, “Look me in the eye and say that”?

When you truly believe in the reading and want to share it, you will not be afraid to look the congregation in the eye. That means true eye-to-eye contact with the assembly, not just peeking up over the edge of the lectionary without genuine contact.

There is a catch here. It is that sometimes they won't be looking at you. They have their reasons for this (often no more than the unfortunate fact that they have been given the text to read). Don't let it bother you. The better you get, the less they will choose to look at anything else.

Of course, it is not possible to look every individual in the assembly in the eye. But you can pick out one at a time. For each phrase or sentence, you can switch your eye contact to an individual in a different part of the church.

Perhaps you wear reading glasses and are not able to see any faces at all. Eye contact is mostly a mind-set: believing that you are speaking face to face with an individual. Even when you can't see individuals distinctly, you must look at specific areas and make the listeners feel you are talking to them individually.

The most important point is this: Eye contact does not pay off if you do it just anywhere in the sentence. It is most effective when it comes at the end of a thought or sentence. As you finish the last phrase or word, make the eye contact that invites the personal involvement of your hearers. That involvement is why this element of speaking is so important.