

Faith and Society Files: Real Life Worship Files – Bible Reading

Does what happens at Sunday worship connect with life in the real world? For many people the answer to that question is often 'no'. This leaflet introduces a series of worship files published by our Union to help churches relate their worship to the realities of contemporary living. In this file we look at Bible reading.

Biblical Story Telling

Picture the scene: a large group of Christians all gathered together in one place for worship, teaching and fellowship. It's the first session of the day, and people are still coming into the main seminar room, finding a seat, taking coats off, juggling half-empty plastic cups of coffee. At the front, two people are getting ready to lead the session, so the people gathered in the room begin to lower their voices, still whispering their greetings to one another. One person on the stage stands up and welcomes everybody, and introduces a preacher, who, in a few minutes will be coming to the microphone, bringing God's word for the morning. People look expectantly at the preacher, confident that they are going to be enriched by the word for the morning.

The first speaker announces the Bible passage that the preacher will be using, and begins to read the passage. All around the room, people are beginning to settle down and become a little more still. They surreptitiously fish around in bags to find their notebook and pen. They hurriedly finish the conversations they were in the middle of. They find a home by their feet for the coffee cup. The reading comes to an end and the preacher stands up. At once a hush falls. There is no more movement, no more talking. The 'main event' has begun.

Why is it that gathered Christians can be so attentive and receptive to a preacher, and yet the Bible reading on which a sermon is based does not warrant the same attention? Why is it that we are 'all ears' when listening to someone expound the Scriptures, yet the reading of Scripture itself often seems to deserve only half an ear?

Or picture another scene: a group of Christians are gathered together in their building, for their usual Sunday service. The minister announces the Bible reading for the day, and out of the congregation walks one person who will read it. That person walks to the lectern – a big solid block of finest oak, which covers everything from the reader's neck downwards. The Bible is opened at the lectern and the person doing the reading

bends their head over it; as the Bible is read, all that is visible is a very prominent bald spot on the reader's head.

A person sitting in the congregation looks around – everyone around them has their own pew Bible open; they are following the passage as it is read. Corporate tops of heads are all that can be seen. The person doing the reading has obviously prepared well – they read confidently and with expression. But still, the words are hard to engage with; the world that is described seems a long way away.

And picture a third scene, again in church: the Bible reading is announced. The person doing the reading steps out from behind the lectern. The passage has been learnt off-by-heart, word-for-word, and the storyteller has absorbed it and is embodying it. Every eye and ear is fixed on the storyteller, and the congregation catches its breath, because to all intents and purposes they are 'there' – at the heart of the story; hearing the passage like it is happening today.

This is the basis of Biblical storytelling, which is transforming corporate acts of worship, and enabling people to engage with Scripture in a powerful and life-changing way.

A Provisional Definition...

of Biblical Storytelling is given by Practitioner Dennis Dewey –

'Biblical storytelling is the lively interpretation, expression and animation of a narrative text of the Old or New Testament that has first been deeply internalised and is then remembranced, embodied, breathed and voiced by a teller/performer as a sacred event in community with an audience/congregation.'

What is Biblical Story Telling?

- Biblical story telling involves a person (not necessarily the minister)

learning the Bible passage off-by-heart, in order to tell it, without script, during a corporate act of worship.

- The Bible is rooted in oral culture. Biblical storytelling attempts to reconnect with those roots.
- Much preparation is needed for Biblical storytelling. Most practitioners will start preparing early in the week, for the coming Sunday.
- There are agreed professional standards among biblical storytellers. If you are telling the story 'as Scripture', the storyteller should aim for 90% content accuracy and 75% verbal accuracy.

The Benefits of Biblical Story Telling

- Practitioners of biblical storytelling say that this has transformed worship services. They describe what it is like to tell a Bible story, look around the church, and realise that everyone is totally gripped.
- The humour and wisdom of the Bible can be appreciated much more, when it is learnt and presented, rather than just read.
- Powerful passages, such as Jesus' healing touch upon people in the gospels, can have a profoundly moving effect on a congregation. They can identify with biblical characters much more easily, and find it possible to hear the voice of God speaking to them today.
- Even passages which are less about 'an event' and more about a process of thinking come across very well through being learnt. The congregation understands much more easily what is being said; what is meant; and what motives and feelings are tied up on the passage.

Telling the Bible Stories in Other Imaginative Ways

Presenting a Bible passage in corporate worship, that has been learnt off-by-heart,

can provide varied and powerful opportunities for people to engage with Scripture. However, there are times when the passage can be better served in another way.

The challenge is always to present the passage in a way that causes the congregation to be fully focussed, yet without resorting to a desire to impress, entertain or titillate.

There may be times when it is quite appropriate to startle the congregation; other times when a simple visual image while the reading is in progress, can make all the difference.

Here are 3 examples of Bible readings that can be done in a different way. The key is to keep it simple. Even small symbolic acts can have a big effect; and it is important that the passage is served, rather than overshadowed.

The raising of Lazarus is profound and powerfully-told by the gospel writer (John 11). It can almost feel as though the reader of the passage is getting in the way. How about reading from the back of the room and asking someone to stand very still at the front, with arms folded across their chest. Get two people to slowly wrap that person up with strips of white linen, in order to try and convey some of the tragedy of that situation.

So much of Jesus' ministry is based on interruptions and disruptions, by individuals in need. It can be helpful for a congregation to enter into the sense of unease and fear that the community around Jesus will have had, whenever Jesus was confronted by a troubled person. This can be achieved simply by having a second person stand at the back of the room, speaking the lines of the demoniac, or whoever is featured in the passage (e.g. Mark 1:21-29).

Most Bible readings are delivered from the same position at church, week after week – usually a lectern on the stage at the front. It can be most helpful to hear the Bible read from different parts of the worship space. This can be done nicely in a psalm of praise, such as *Psalm 147* by having 3 voices read parts of the psalm – one voice from the front, another from the back left, and the other from back right. Or, two voices – one on the left and the other of the right of the worship space can be useful when there is some kind of internal or external dialogue taking place, or question and answer process, such as in the book of Job.

A Step-by-Step Process of Learning a Bible Passage by Heart

1. PREPARE YOURSELF, with prayer and stillness.
2. READ THE STORY OUT LOUD
3. Think about the CONTENT AND STRUCTURE of the passage.
4. PREPARE A SCRIPT of the text, setting it out on the page in a way that fits with the structure of the story. It is possible to slightly restructure sentences, in order that they might roll off the tongue more easily.
5. STAND UP and READ ALOUD the story from your script, several times, pausing often to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the characters; making connections with your own experiences. If you are preaching on this passage, you may find that it is at this stage the ideas and insights for a sermon come.
6. In your mind's eye, VISUALISE the scene. If the story involves travel, have a clear idea where the character is coming from and where they are heading. If two people are talking in the passage, be clear about who is standing where.
7. REPETITION, REPETITION, REPETITION. This is the 'hard-work' stage of becoming less and less reliant on your script. Try not to focus on the words as an end in themselves; rather, try to visualise what is going on, and then attach the words to what you see.
8. GET A FEEL FOR THE STORY. Know when to slow down, pause, and speed up.
9. GET IT INTO YOUR MUSCLE MEMORY. Gesturing will help the words to come to you.
10. LET THE STORY STAND as it is. There is no need to embellish it.
11. Do not imagine that you are bringing the story to life. Rather, you are EXPRESSING THE LIFE THAT IS IN THE STORY.
12. Constantly remind yourself that you are not 'memorising'; you are INTERNALISING, or learning it by heart. The story is to become part of you.
13. TELL THE STORY OUT LOUD, over and over and over again – in the bath, walking the dog, doing the washing up, spending time with your children.

This Real Life Worship File was inspired by a seminar on Biblical Storytelling, given by Dennis Dewey. Some of the content is based on Mr Dewey's training literature.

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