



10. What Are Readers For?

The title of Reader, or Lector, goes back to the early years of the Church, and denoted the person having responsibility for guarding the books of Scripture and reading them at the Eucharist. During times of persecution, this could be a dangerous responsibility.

The office of Reader was one of the minor orders and as such was abolished in England at the Reformation. However it was revived by Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1561, as a title for lay people who would minister in poorer parishes 'destitute of incumbents', following the upheavals following Mary I's attempt to root out Protestantism. They were permitted to read the appointed services 'plainlie, distinctlie and audiblie', but not to preach or interpret; to bury the dead and purify women after childbirth, but not to administer the sacraments or other rites of the Church. There were never many Readers of this sort, but they seem to have survived until the eighteenth century, in some of the remoter parts of the North of England.

During the nineteenth century, there was a rapid increase of population, particularly in the North of England, which threatened to overwhelm the Church, particularly as the clergy were concentrated in the South. Many, especially Evangelicals, were concerned that the 'labouring classes' were not receiving any religious instruction whatever. Perhaps they were also concerned at the spread of Methodism! However the Church of England, surprisingly, had insufficient resources to train and to provide benefices for the numbers of clergy who would be required to meet the perceived need within a reasonable time.

It was decided that the best way forward was to enlist the voluntary services of 'devout and competent laymen' (not women, yet!), who would not be in orders, but licensed by their Bishops after showing themselves qualified. The revival of the office of and title of Reader was decided upon at a meeting of the Archbishops and Bishops of Canterbury and York in 1866, and the range of their duties has tended inexorably to increase. It has been suggested recently that there is a place in the Church of England, as in the Lutheran and Orthodox Churches, for a 'Permanent Diaconate', and that all

Readers should be ordained Deacons. This has aroused a lively controversy, as very many Readers regard their Lay status as distinctive and valuable.

For the foreseeable future, the function of a Reader remains that of preaching, teaching, and acting as an unpaid assistant to the clergy in all matters except those needing to be conducted by an ordained minister - specifically, the celebration of any sacrament. For assistance of that kind, the incumbent needs an Assistant Priest, either with a stipend or, increasingly, a member of the ordained Non-Stipendiary Ministry, whose services are more than ever necessary in the Church of England, and to whose status the office of Reader offers, and can offer, no threat.