

## **Lectio Divina: A Practice for Meditating on God's Word**

*'O how I love your law. I meditate on it all day long.'* Psalm 119:97

Divine or sacred reading is a way of praying the Scriptures that was brought to the western Church by John Cassian in the 5<sup>th</sup> century from the Easter Desert Fathers. It was adopted by the communities of monks and nuns founded by St Benedict. He expected his monks to read the Scriptures meditatively. Often they could not read nor did they have whole Bibles. They listened to it and carried it in their hearts instead. In fact *Lectio* could perhaps better be called 'the prayer of the listening heart'. The words and phrases of Scripture that they used were only those noticed and remembered by the monks as they listened to Bible readings or recited the Psalms.

Essentially *Lectio* is a way of 'letting the word of Christ dwell us richly,' as Paul says to the early church (Col 3:16). It is an attitude rather than a technique. There isn't really a correct way to do it. It appeals to all personality types and you can use your intellect and/or your imagination as the Holy Spirit leads you.

I will describe the various components of *Lectio* but again they may well happen in a different order and you may not even be able to distinguish between them. David Foster called his book on *Lectio* Reading with God and he urges us to listen to the Scriptures as part of a conversation with Jesus. We are to put ourselves in God's presence with Jesus there to read the Scriptures to us. It's as if he is reading to us and our task is to listen.

That means *Lectio* starts not with us doing something to the text – you know how so much of our reading is for a particular purpose and stems from our agenda. We read to get something we need. *Lectio* allows God to set the

agenda. We put ourselves at the service of God's Word rather than putting God's Word at our service. As we listen Jesus is at work in our hearts exploring the Scriptures with us and enabling us to hear the good news now for us today.

It means reading at a new pace as well. There are many courses on speed reading. This is one on slow reading. Listening takes time. We have to slow down and go at God's pace. It may take patience for we have to clear our minds of whatever is cluttering up our mental and emotional space. These two things: letting God set the agenda and slowing down are probably the two hardest lessons to learn in practicing *Lectio*.

### **How to meditate on God's word**

- Choose a time of day when you are feeling most alert, least tired, most well-rested and without outside pressure.
- Find somewhere where you won't be disturbed, somewhere quiet, right temperature, comfortable but not so comfortable that you fall asleep.
- First ask God to bless this time with him and guide you. Recall that he wants you to hear his voice today.

#### **1. Read (*lectio*)**

- Choose a passage. Short sections of scripture are best for the practice of meditation. You may decide to work your way slowly through a whole book. C S Lewis noted in the Screwtape Letters that reading long passages of Scripture can sometimes be the devil's shrewdest way of distracting us from a depth encounter with God.
- Read the passage through slowly two or three times.

- Savour the words and notice when you feel drawn to a particular part of the reading. Often it will be a single word or phrase that strikes us. When you have settled on that word, phrase or verse stay with it.
- Repeat it to yourself slowly.

## 2. Meditate (*meditatio*)

- The idea of meditation may need some defense. It is unexplored territory for many Christians. Yet this kind of praying goes very deep down into our being and enables the life-giving presence of God to spring up in the midst of our busy everyday lives. It is a receptive way of praying.
- Deut 11; Josh 1:6-9; Ps 19; Jesus - these passages suggest that there is a place for allowing the word to soak into us in ways that involve our hearts and our minds. A deepening.
- This part is to enable the word to get off the page and into our hearts. Meditation involves giving the Lord time to help us understand his meaning in his word.
- It means being open to the Spirit and attentive to Jesus and what he may be leading us to discover. It is rather like learning to have the alertness of a watchman who is both still and alert, ready for any sign of movement.
- It allows the hidden work of the Spirit to open our spiritual eyes and ears. St Benedict began his Rule with the words: "Listen with the ears of your heart."
- Abbot Marmion (6<sup>th</sup> Century) said: "We read under the eye of God until the heart is touched and leaps to flame."

- Use your mind and your heart for this process. Ruminating, chew on it. The psalmist referred to a honey-like sweetness in God's word (Ps 119:103,131).
- Meditation is linked with the mouth in Scripture: The picture of a cow chewing the cud is one way to understand this process. The grass has been pulled and swallowed and now the digestive process begins, slowly chewing until every last bit of goodness has been extracted.
- Often as we reflect on a passage of scripture it will bring to mind other passages as well as helping us make connections between what we read and our experience. Hence meditation needs to be leisurely and without fixed techniques.
- The meaning of a passage is not a simple message for us to 'get' so that we can then move on to the next one. Its meaning is something we will discover unfolding as it becomes an integral part of our spiritual imagination. Often it may be enough to store the word of God in our hearts and to cultivate the qualities of heart that will let us keep the word well. In God's time we may then return to the word we have meditated on and understand or it may be that it will stir in our memories and bring us to understand.
- **A word about feelings:** For the Hebrews, the heart was first and foremost the seat of the will and the seat of affection, the place of discernment and the source of intention. It governed the entire body.
- Our "felt response" is one which comes deeper than a place in our head. Our hearts are deeper than our emotional lives, but our felt response is a good way of finding a path to the door of the heart. (Heb 4:12-16).

- To start with our feelings could lead to emotionalism or sentimentality, but not to notice them or to avoid a response to Scripture that tries to by-pass them will prevent the Word from reaching our hearts and thus prevent it becoming a Word of God for us. Feelings show us the way to the heart, our personal centre.

### **3. Pray (*oratio*)**

- Lectio is more than a way of reading. It is a way of praying, of responding to God's word to us. We are seeking to let the words of scripture illuminate our experience and understanding and using them to nourish a sense of God's presence in our own hearts and minds so that we can listen to him and let him help us find ourselves in relation to him.
- The aim then is to deepen our friendship with the Lord and our commitment to him.
- In reading scripture in this way, we are pursuing an active kind of reading in that we are not just passive listeners but our prayers and our lives become our whole response to what we hear.
- We learn to *listen* to the Scriptures, not just read them so that they may be words of life to us. This may come as truth, as a challenge, as comfort, as rebuke, or in any other way that God wants to speak to us. We can share our deepest thoughts and feelings: our hopes, desires, joy, sadness, confusion, disappointment or gratitude – whatever is in our heart and soul, the depths of our being.
- Prayer is a dialogue with God and as we converse we also find that the most important task is to learn to listen to him. It is where we learn to

let God initiate the conversation. He sets the tone and the agenda. So we wait for his response to whatever we have brought to him.

#### **4. Rest (*contemplatio*)**

- When you have said what you want to say to God simply be still in his presence and enjoy being there. Picture it as gazing on the loveliness of the Lord and know that he is gazing back at you with love. This cannot be hurried. We have to be willing to wait upon the Lord. We may not be aware of anything happening but we trust that God is working in the depths of our soul.
- Remember that Jesus said “Come to me” and that God delights in you. He wants your company. Do you believe that?
- When a distraction arises you can simply begin reading again and the whole process is repeated.
- You can close the whole process with the Lord’s Prayer.
- Don’t worry about getting the order of these steps right. If you start praying straight away that’s fine. Or if the words bring your thoughts to a halt that’s fine.

#### **5. Read, reflect, respond, rest.**

- And finally review. Look back at the prayer time and note anything that strikes you – especially resistance or resonances and when they occurred and how they felt. These can be the things that need to be explored in a future time of prayer.
- The great thing is that you can recall your word or phrase at different points in the day. Originally *lectio* was linked to manual work so that

it was possible to continue savoring the word or phrase as you went about the daily tasks assigned.

- *Lectio* offers us a way of deepening our awareness of God in the midst of such busy lives where so much is superficial and hurried.
- Try recording your words in a journal or even noting them on a card and keeping it in your pocket.