

A few weeks ago – or to be more precise – two months ago, Fr Wulstan gave a talk on *Lectio divina*. He used the classic division which comes from Guigo II, Prior of the Grande Chartreuse in 1174-1180. He described the process of *lectio* in four different moments, *Lectio* or reading, leading to *Meditatio* or meditation on, chewing, reflecting on the text read, and then *Oratio*, which literally means prayer. In this case the prayer is when I, the reader, reply in prayer to God's Word in the conversation between us; it is the human response, spoken, murmured or at any rate formed in words. Guigo goes on to say that the fourth phase *Contemplatio* may or may not follow, a wordless communion with God, merely being in and rejoicing in the presence of God. That is all very well, but I want to go back to our own St Bede, four centuries earlier. Bede is always practical and down-to-earth. I can't claim him as a Yorkshireman, but at any rate a Northumbrian, which was then in the same kingdom as Ampleforth is now. He gives three ways of treating the Word of God in scripture and *lectio*, using the image of cooking. Bede compares the first, most superficial, way to cooking fish on an open gridiron – a careless and not very profound way of cooking. The second, more careful, way is compared to cooking in a frying-pan, when the fish is turned in the pan and carefully cooked on both sides. The third stage is when the food is put in the oven and thoroughly cooked through and through; the cook rummages around to bring it out of the oven when it is well done.

Bede is not trying to do the same thing as Guigo (who would of course have read Bede), because all these three ways of cooking refer to the first stage given by Guigo, the *lectio* stage, marking how well we do the reading. The reason why I have brought this up is that the full meaning of scripture is not always immediately obvious, and some preparation and forethought helps immensely toward appreciating the richness. The Church insists that any edition of the Bible should always have explanatory notes. I want to illustrate this and at the same time actually prepare for *lectio* with reference to a favourite passage of mine, the Annunciation in Luke 1.26-38, and I shall do this with reference to the version most familiar to me, the Revised New Jerusalem Bible.

To begin with, it is always worth reading the Introduction to the book you have chosen for *lectio*. The Introduction to Luke focuses on his skill as a story-teller, his creation of little visual scenes; this does not mean they are invented, for a story-teller works with some data, shaping it to bring out the central points as seen by that particular story-teller. We all know what it looked like – from Fra Angelico: Mary kneeling at her prie-dieu, and the angel, probably androgynous, floating down, wings outspread, to greet her. In the same way, we all know, from the famous painting by Caravaggio, that on the Road to Damascus Paul was knocked to the ground from his horse. There is, in fact, in the account no horse, not even donkey (which progresses incredibly slowly – I was once walking along in the desert of Judea and was offered a lift on a donkey by a Beduin schoolboy going home from school, but soon decided to walk because it was quicker, not to mention more comfortable). Nor is there any visual description of the angel of the annunciation, or of Mary's prie-dieu. Anyway, if Fra Angelico can use his imagination, so can I. My own imaginative picture is that Mary was mucking out the chickens or fetching water from the well when suddenly the messenger of the Lord put an idea into her head. It is the message that matters, rather than the messenger.

What was she thinking about? The wedding, of course, and the family she was going to have with that attractive young man to whom she was engaged. How many children? How many cousins at the wedding? How would they pay for the wine? Then, quite from the outside, all that was shattered by the message from the Lord. She was being offered something quite different: would she consent?

In what terms was this framed? The only intellectual, historical or religious background Mary had was framed in terms of the Bible which she would have heard read at synagogue week after week. The message begins, 'Rejoice!' And this is where the marginal references (provided for you in the margins, the biblical annotations to the text) come in. Mary would hardly know that this greeting,

'Rejoice', occurs only three times in the Old Testament, but she would know the occasions when it does, and would make the connections, for each time it is a greeting that messianic salvation is due to break out. In Zephaniah 3.14 daughter Zion or daughter Jerusalem is called to rejoice and shout aloud because the Lord is king among you, Israel. In Zechariah 2.14 daughter Zion is called to rejoice 'for I am coming to live among you – declares the Lord' (the third mention is Joel 2.21-27). So this is a messianic greeting, announcing that the Lord is at last coming to his people. Mary would prick up her ears. This first greeting is reinforced by the second word, which we continue to render in St Jerome's curious phrase *plena gratiae*, 'full of grace'. The Greek has nothing to do with being full or empty, as though with some substance. Mary is greeted as having been made personally delightful, attractive, lovable, someone whose company is a joy and a delight, and normally the joy and delight is in God, denoting a personal closeness and union.

The rest of the greeting, with its allusion to the promises to David (2 Sm 7.15) of an heir whose reign would have no end, would suggest to her not only the ancient promises to David but also the prophecy of Daniel 7.14, 'his kingship will never come to an end'. This is a daunting allusion to the figure representing Israel, a human being or son of man who would come to the One of Great Age and receive from him an everlasting rule and a kingship which will never come to an end. All this is contained in the couple of sentences of the message.

To one whose only book-learning was shaped by listening in the synagogue the meaning would be clear. She was being asked to forego her plans for building a family with the lovely Joseph in favour of a mission so staggeringly central to the whole purpose of Israel. When she asks the sexual question, 'because I know not man' she is again referred to the Bible, the child to be miraculously born to the ancient couple, Abraham and Sarah, barren and sexually inactive, 'nothing is impossible to God', the words spoken in Genesis 18.14 by Abraham's divine visitors(s) – again a marginal reference takes us to the allusion. The promised child is to be born not through the normal human sexual process. So Mary is being offered an opportunity, but at a price. She has to make her decision and count the cost; she is poised to change her life-plan – or not.

If there is any need to focus more clearly on Mary's need for choice and decision, it can be made clear by St Bernard's own *lectio divina*, his meditation on this supreme moment of decision, which he imagines with a plea to Mary herself:

'By one little word of yours in answer shall we all be made alive. Adam asks this of you, O loving Virgin, poor Adam, exiled as he is from paradise with all his poor wretched children. Abraham begs this of you, and David. This all the holy fathers implore, who themselves are dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death. This the world awaits, kneeling at your feet. The angel is waiting for your answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for the word of pity, even we who are overwhelmed in wretchedness by the sentence of doom. If you consent, straightway shall we be freed. Answer, O Virgin, answer the angel speedily. Speak the word and receive the Word. Offer what is yours and receive what is God's. Why delay? Why tremble? Believe, speak, receive. Open, O blessed Virgin, your heart to faith. Open your lips to speak. Open your womb to your Maker. Behold! The Desired of all nations is outside, knocking at your door. Oh, if by your delay he should pass by, and again in sorrow you should have to begin to seek him whom your soul loves! Arise, then, run and open. And Mary said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word".'

Questions to ask yourself in prayer:

What does this tell us about the new relationship between God and his human creatures?

Have you ever needed to make a decision so fierce and so costly? Did you fail or were you helped through it?

Does anyone else need your help and strength in a difficult situation?

Choose another favourite passage and see if it is enriched by the same sort of study and use of notes. Try the Feeding of the Five Thousand in Mark 6.30-44, or the Testing in the Desert (Matthew 4.1-11).