

Home Retreats

Lectio Divina

Introduction

The encounter with Christ, which lies at the heart of prayer, has been sought by Christians in a variety of ways. One way of praying characteristic of the monastic tradition – but which is not exclusive to it, but rather is open to all Christians – is that of *lectio divina*, namely the prayerful reading of the Scriptures, a way of coming into contact with Jesus, the Word of God, simply spending time with him, so as to learn from him and to be formed by him. As we read in the First Letter of St Peter:

The Lord is the living stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him; set yourselves close to him so that you too, the holy priesthood that offers the spiritual sacrifices which Jesus has made acceptable to God, may be living stones making a spiritual house.

(1 Peter 2: 4-5)

The *Rule of St Benedict*

For St Benedict, *lectio divina* was simply a given in the monastic life; you can see the evidence of this in the text of his *Rule*, which is suffused with references and allusions to the Scriptures, some translations indicating these in italics. To use a modern expression, we can say that Benedict ‘lived from his *lectio*’ and taught his followers – both in his own day and now – the centrality of *lectio* as a way of praying and becoming, becoming what we are called to be, in the Christian life.

This being so, it should come as no surprise that in Chapter 48 of his *Rule* entitled, ‘The Daily Manual Labour’ which outlines the working day for his monks, that

Benedict should write that in addition to times of manual labour ‘the brothers should have specified periods... for prayerful reading.’ In fact, some commentators have suggested that this chapter is actually much more about the importance of *lectio divina* than manual labour, given how carefully Benedict allocates time for it, even saying that ‘one or two seniors must surely be deputed to make the rounds of the monastery while the brothers are reading. Their duty is to see that no brother is so apathetic as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract his brothers.’ Whilst this might sound a little strange - even harsh - to our ears, this injunction does tell us just how important and foundational to the Christian life Benedict regarded this encounter with the Word of God in Scripture to be, it being an encounter with Christ himself.

Lectio Divina

Whilst there is no set, or single, way of *lectio divina*, this way of praying was given particular expression, some would say its classic expression, by the twelfth-century Carthusian monk, Guigo, the Prior of the Grande Chartreuse, in his *Ladder of Monks*. Guigo accepted a division of *lectio* into four stages: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation, which flow one into the next, and which he said constitute ‘the ladder of monks by which they are raised up from earth to heaven.’ Guigo gives a brief definition of each of the four rungs:

Reading is, as it were, the foundation and comes first; it supplies material and then refers us to meditation. Meditation earnestly enquires what we should seek, and, as it were, digs out and finds the treasure and shows it to us, but since it cannot obtain anything by itself, it refers us on to prayer. Prayer raises itself up with all its might towards God and asks for the desired treasure, the sweetness of contemplation.

This characterisation of *lectio*, however, if one is not careful to read it within the context of the monastic tradition can seem to suggest that all one has to do to achieve a state of contemplation, and thus union with God, is to begin reading carefully. Furthermore, both reading and meditation, according to Guigo's presentation, can too easily be seen as purely intellectual exercises. The key to *lectio* is to regard the whole activity as prayer, and to remember that prayer is a gift from God. This means that it should be not a surprise if the gift of contemplation is only rarely granted, except perhaps to those called 'mystics', and that for most an aspiration towards contemplation – which we can think of as a simple, wordless, loving desire for God - must suffice. So, whenever we begin *lectio*, we should begin with prayer, remembering that it is God in Christ whom we seek and to whom our prayer is addressed.

The Fathers spoke of letting the mind descend into the heart and according to the late Trappist Abbot Andre Louf what happens in *lectio divina* is that, 'the mind temporarily abandons its independent abstract explorations in order to arrive at union with the heart where the affective and intuitive faculties are hidden'; in other words, the prayer of *lectio* affects the whole person at the very centre of his or her being. Accordingly, meditation as part of *lectio* – a mulling over of the words that we have read - is not an active intellectual process whereby reading is fitted into a conceptual framework, but rather a process of allowing the Word of God to 'break open and reform' the reader: it is, then, a genuine encounter with Christ the Word, who in this encounter acts upon the one who is reading and praying.

In the time of St Benedict, and into the middle ages, the readers actually pronounced the words of their *lectio* with their lips, albeit quietly, as part of memorising the text and allowing it to sink into themselves. This reading and meditation,

inscribes, so to speak, the sacred text in the body and in the soul.... To meditate is to attach oneself closely to the sentence being recited and weigh all its words in order to sound the depths of their full meaning. It means assimilating the content of a text by means of a kind of mastication which releases its full flavour.

Lectio divina, then, is a slow, meditative ruminating on the words of Scripture, which allows Jesus, the Word of God, into both mind and heart, transforming the believer into his likeness. In short, it is 'prayerful reading'; and hence the advice given to the monk:

When he reads, let him seek savour, not science. The holy scripture is the well of Jacob from which the waters are drawn which will be poured out later in prayer. Thus, there will be no need to go to the oratory to begin to pray; but in reading itself, means will be found for prayer and contemplation.

Suggestions

Clearly, it is one thing to talk about prayer and another – though related – thing actually to pray. This being so, I would encourage you to spend a little time today praying with the Scriptures. Whilst there is no one way of doing this, you could try the following:

- Choose a favourite Scriptural passage or if one of these doesn't come quickly to mind you could look at the Gospel for Mass tomorrow or perhaps the beginning of St John's Gospel, the first fourteen verses of the Prologue.
- Find somewhere comfortable and quiet, where you won't be disturbed.

- Begin with a prayer, recognising that you are in the presence of God, committing this time to Him, and asking for the grace to hear His Word spoken in the Scriptures.
- Read the passage slowly from beginning to end, and then pause for a moment of silence.
- When you are ready, read the passage again, this time allowing yourself to dwell on any words or phrases that catch your attention, that seem to speak to you, and just stay with these quietly.
- When you have done this, allow yourself a time of silence in the presence of God.
- When you are ready once more, read the passage slowly from beginning to end, concluding with a Glory be to the Father.
- If you were to find it helpful, as many do, you could make a note of any words or phrases that struck you during this time of prayerful reading, as a way of helping you to remember them, and also creating a '*lectio* diary' that you can use to pray with another time.
- Finally, as the day goes on, try to bring your mind back to your *lectio divina* and those words or phrases that struck you, allowing yourself to dwell on them, making this itself an act of prayer that you offer to God.