

Home Retreat – *Lectio divina*

At the moment in the Community at Ampleforth, at the Office of Matins we are reading (for the first reading) the letter of St Paul to the Romans. Reading the scriptures is, of course, an important part of the life of any Christian, but particular for followers of the monastic way of life. The letter to the Romans is a rich – if not always easy – document, which contains much good advice for the living of the Christian life. We have not yet reached this place, but in Chapter 15, there is a pithy little sentence which contains some very good advice for us as we seek to practice *lectio divina*, the meditative and deliberate reading of the scriptures. St Paul says this:

Whatever was written previously, was written for the purpose of our instruction, so that, through perseverance and the consolation of the scriptures, we might have hope. (Rom. 15:4)

We have already had one or two Home Retreats on the topic of *lectio*, so I don't really want to go over that ground again: I will assume that people who might be listening in are familiar with *lectio*; if not, can I suggest that you look again at one of the previous Home Retreats on that topic? What I would like to do today is to use this little verse from St Paul to think a bit about what it might look like when we engage with *lectio divina* on a long-term basis. What then is this verse saying to us?

'Whatever was written previously...' Let's dwell for a minute on that idea of 'previously'. I think this underlines something important about our life as Christians. We are disciples in a workshop which, it turns out, has been around for some little time. In recent centuries, particularly in the developed world, we have tended towards a mentality of the self-made man or woman: I made me what I am. This can be quite a deeply ingrained mentality, it turns out; we need to be careful that we do not allow this way of thinking to take root in our spiritual life, even unconsciously. We are not, apparently, being asked to start our spiritual journey from ground zero; we are not being asked to reinvent the wheel, and arrive at every theological truth or principle of the spiritual life with no outside help. No: quite the opposite. It turns out that, even if we had infinite patience and stamina and all the time in the world, we could never get

to God from our own merits and efforts. The good news is that we are not being asked to. We are members of the Church, the Body of Christ. It is Christ who works in us for good; our getting to God is first and foremost his achievement. Not to mention any direct help that we might receive from God, we have the privilege of enjoying the fellowship of countless others – Christians and members of the people of Israel – who have trodden the ways of God before us, and if we are prepared to listen to their wise counsels, then our own journey will be the more fruitful. I think this is really what *lectio* is about. True, the bible contains the written Word of God, and when we meditate upon it, that Word can come alive for us in a way which is very direct. Perhaps such responses are rare, at least for some people; I don't think they happen most of the time for anyone. The writings of the bible, though, are also operative at another level: they represent the experience of many generations of those who have sought – and, we may believe, found – the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, just as we aspire to.

Well, so what? I think this requires humility of us. If we are going to engage in *lectio divina*, we have to be content (and more than content) with being a disciple, not a master; with being one who asks questions, not one who answers them. We have to have the conviction that those who have gone ahead of us were not – as we like to think in the modern world – poor wretches, who lived before the world was as sophisticated as it is now; no, they are people who have something to teach us. This is true of the human authors of the biblical books, and it is true of the great writers of the Church, from St Clement of Rome, to the great spiritual writers of our own time. We have to be willing, even before we open the book, to listen to what the scriptures may say to us. Humility then, and a willingness to be a disciple: this is part of what St Paul is encourage us to in this verse. What else has he got to say?

Perhaps we could flip back for a minute to the beginning of the verse: 'Whatever was written previously...' St Paul is talking about the bible, of course – although for him

at that time, that meant the Hebrew scriptures, the *Tanakh*: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. What about this word ‘whatever’ in particular, though?

I have always been captivated by music, mainly (but not exclusively) classical. Before I was a monk, I used to be quite an impulsive buyer of CDs (which shows how long ago that was), often on the basis of one track that I had heard somehow. I would then proceed to play that track on repeat – usually manually, by skipping back when it got to the end, for days on end, perhaps even weeks, irritating and testing my parents or housemates and so on. Eventually, I would be tidying my room or something, and the CD would move on before I had a chance to skip back. Most times, I discovered that – shock horror – there were other tracks, often at least as captivating as the one that was currently obsessing me, on the rest of the CD, only I had kept myself from listening to them, because I had wanted to stay with the familiar and favourite.

So it is, I think, with our *lectio*; when he says ‘whatever was written previously,’ I think St Paul is saying that we have to be prepared to listen to the whole bible, not to extracts from the scriptures; to the radio, not to our own pre-chosen playlist. If we don’t, we will miss out on a lot. Sometimes (and it is only sometimes) the thing we most need to hear is the very thing we don’t want to hear. An even worse version of this malady comes when we put ourselves above the text, as a judge. Some of the most tragic characters in the history of the Church have been those who have written off passages or books of the bible, simply because they don’t feel that they fit into their spiritual universe. We shouldn’t decide whether or not something has been inspired by the Holy Spirit on the basis of whether or not it happens to titillate us personally and fit in with our own, narrow worldview. We need to approach the biblical text with the faith that everything that is written there has been inspired by the Holy Spirit, and is thus the Word of God. We need to be careful that we are not trying to censor the Holy Spirit. God, it turns out, wants to speak freely to us; this is maybe not surprising as God wants friendship with us, and one of the characteristics of our friends is that we feel we can speak more openly to them than to others. God is not going to react kindly

if we want to converse with him, but we try to present him with a list of banned topics. There is a lot of talk in students' unions these days about 'no platforming' and 'safe spaces'. Well, it turns out we can't 'no platform' a bit of what God has said or wants to say now, without no platforming him altogether. If we are after safe spaces, maybe *lectio divina* and the spiritual life are not for us! As St Jerome says somewhere, *lectio divina* is 'opening our sails to the Holy Spirit, without knowing on what shores we will land.' This is (potentially) dangerous stuff! We need to be able to let God have the freedom that he wants. Perhaps the gold standard in terms of practice of *lectio divina* is taking the readings the Church gives us for the Mass of the day or – even better – sticking with an entire biblical book all the way through. Either way, once we have started, it is not we ourselves who dictate what we read; we simply read, and see whether something within us responds.

The last things I want to talk about are the perseverance and the consolation of the scriptures that St Paul talks about. Let's take the consolation first! It sounds promising, doesn't it? The slight problem is that the Greek word for consolation (*paraclesis*, like the Holy Paraclete, the Holy Spirit) is a bit more complicated than that. True, it can mean 'consolation' but it can also mean an exhortation. An imploring, or an appeal; a demand or a request; a calling to aid or a summons. Not all of these words are light and fluffy. This is why St Jerome is so keen to say that reading the Scriptures – properly reading the scriptures – is a dangerous business. The strength we receive from it might not be a very comfortable strength! We need to be ready for that.

Many of these words – imploring, or an appeal; a demand or a request; a calling to aid or a summons – are, almost by their definitions, taking us beyond the realm of reading and reflection, aren't they? They are a summons to action. The medieval monks were conscious that our *lectio*, if it is real, needs to be expressed in our conduct. St James talks about this in his letter, when he says: 'Be doers of the words, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself

and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.’ St Bernard also talks about it in one of his Advent sermons (5), when he is discussing how we should keep the word of God:

Keep the Word of God in the same way you best keep food for your body. Earthly bread in the cupboard can be snatched by a thief, it can be nibbled at by a mouse, it can grow stale with age. Once you have eaten it, do you worry about any of these things? In this way, keep God’s word: *Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.* Let it enter into the bowels of your soul. Let it pass into your feelings and into your routines... If you keep God’s word like this, you will surely be kept by him. The Son shall come to you with the Father, the great Prophet who will restore Jerusalem will come and make all things new.

St Paul clearly knows that this is sometimes a tall order, and that it will require effort. This is why he goes on to say that the scriptures help us through *perseverance*. The Greek word Paul uses for this perseverance, *hypomone*, has various shades of meaning: to stay behind; to stay alive; to expect; to stand firm/fast; to endure; to bear to suffer. It is, in other words, not just patience: a passive enduring of whatever might be happening to us. It is more active than that. In the Old Testament, this endurance is often about clinging or cleaving to God (think of Job). It has the sense of expectation, yes, but confident expectation. I think this is the sort of perseverance that St Paul is talking about in our quotation, and he seems to be suggesting that it will be nourished by our *lectio divina*. This might seem strange, but I think he is right, isn’t he? We can know that something is right [that there is a suffering that should be endured, for example], but not have the strength to do the thing. Somehow, the fact that we come across a command, a call to endurance in the context of prayerful reflection on scripture means that we believe it at a deep level and feel more disposed to do it than we might otherwise. The words of scripture experienced in *lectio* have an enormous power sometimes, don’t they? It is very strange.

Let us give thanks, then, for the God's gift to us of himself in his word, and particularly for the gift of our encounter with that Word in *lectio divina*. Let us cling to that Word so that, as St Paul suggests, we might have hope, particularly in a time in which there is so much despair.

Suggestions for the day

1. Probably the most important thing is to do some *lectio divina*. Choose your own passage, or one of the following if you do not have a passage in mind:

James 1:19-27

Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.

If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Isaiah 55:1-3

Ho, every one who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good,

and delight yourselves in fatness.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

2. Reflect on whether you might be being called to embark on a *lectio* journey that involves sticking with an entire biblical book from beginning to end, no matter how slowly or quickly you may feel moved to read the book. This is a matter for prayerful discernment, but why not consider trying a shorter book to begin with? Perhaps Jonah in the Old Testament, or 1Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus or 1John in the New Testament.