



Lectio Divina

by David Walker, Bishop of Broken Bay

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word was made flesh”.

The Word of God is Jesus. He is the human face of God. It is Jesus who gives meaning to the whole of God’s revelation, and brings to a climax the continuing testimonies of God’s love for us. Any understanding of the expression “Word of God” must be interpreted in the light of Jesus, the Word. The expression “the Word” came to signify the message that Jesus preached, his whole approach to humankind (Lk 8:12), and also the fledgling Christian movement as it began to spread under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 12:24, 6:7)

The Church also acknowledges as the “Word of God” the inspired writings recognised by the early Christian community. These inspired writings are God’s gift to the Church, and in them God’s overwhelming love shines through.

They embody in human word what is embodied in the divine Word who became flesh; and through this inspired human word of the Scriptures we encounter personally the divine Word himself.

Since the beginning of the Christian movement, its members have read the Scriptures as God’s Word speaking to them. They found in them who their God is, the loving providence of their God, their own identity as God’s people, and the responsibilities that go with God’s choice of them to share the divine love with others. As Mary reflected on the unfolding mystery of her divine Son, Christians have continued to reflect on that same mystery which comes to us in the Scriptures. (Luke 2:51).

The reflective reading of the Scriptures leads us to know, understand and appropriate the fundamental Christian mysteries. It helps us to appreciate what we need to do to respond to God’s approach in them, and holds up to us a mirror of how we are responding and what we might need to do to improve and deepen our response. It humbles us and makes us realise that we need God to walk with us on this journey: we cannot walk it alone. It brings us to prayer, in which we implore the divine help. It leads, too, to the transformation of our life of response to God, and enables us, through our lives as disciples of Jesus, to share the divine love we have known with those around us.

This meditative, prayerful reading of the Scriptures has been referred to as *lectio divina*. It can take many forms, but it is necessary to keep in mind the essential aspects of it, lest we read into the Scriptures what we want to hear rather than hear from them what God wants to tell us.

St Augustine's words are relevant: the one who serves you best is not the one who listens for what he wants to hear, but the one who shapes his life according to what he hears. To help us focus on the essential, I will adopt in this book the practice as described by Guigo II, the fifth abbot of the Carthusian order, in his book "The Ladder of Monks (A Letter on the Contemplative Life) and Twelve Meditations."

Lectio divina then, is the meditative reading of a text of God's Word, the Scriptures, alone or with others, which leads to prayer, transformation of life, and, through that transformed life, the sharing with others of the mystery of God entrusted to us. This practice of prayer involves the whole person. Through our senses we read, we meditate using our reason and imagination, and we pray and transform our life with our will. It is not just an interior practice but one that engages with the issues of our Christian life and prompts us to work with them. At different times, the emphasis may be on different aspects of the prayer. But it would be unwise to omit any of them altogether.

In the light of what has been said, we can look at the presuppositions that underpin this form of Scriptural prayer. Firstly it embraces the Scriptures as God's Word speaking to us. It emphasises that this practice is a personal encounter with the eternal Word, who is Jesus. It sees, as the source and goal of this prayer, the life of Christian discipleship.

The image of the arch is sometimes used to speak of prayer. Prayer is designated as the keystone of the arch, the stone at the top which takes the strain, and stops the sides of the arch from falling in. However, the keystone will not stay up there by itself: it needs the sides of the arch.

The sides of the arch are working with our life; to root out the vices and to practice the virtues. The practice of *lectio* is not a discrete or isolated event, totally sufficient in itself: it takes place within the living of Christian discipleship. It arises out of the conscious determined effort to live as disciples of Jesus and has as its goal to strengthen that determination and effort. Transformation of life is an essential element of praying the Scriptures.

How we read the Scriptures will depend on how we understand them. If we recognise them as coming from the God who loves us, we could liken reading them to the beloved reading the letters from her lover. It is the one who loves God deeply who is the most likely to appreciate the deepest dimension of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are not just a book, but a library, with many authors. Any one author may not have known the writings of any other. However, there is a unity here. This is the story of God's love for us, and this is so because the unifying author of all of the Scriptures is the Spirit of God.

This means that in reading the Scriptures we do need to appreciate that there are two senses: that of the historical author and that of the Spirit. The historical critical method helps us to appreciate the historical meaning, but we need another methodology to appreciate the “Spirit-ual” sense: the message that transcends the historical sense, and gives the Scriptures their unique character. Unless we recognise this divine spiritual sense, the Scriptures can be seen as a book of the past, just an historical work, to be explained simply in human terms. *Lectio divina* is always a theological reading of the text of Scripture.

The Scriptures, through the Spirit, emerged from the early Christian community. It was the Church that brought together these disparate books into one canon to make the Scriptures. The life of the early Church was the matrix into which the Scriptures were born. The Scriptures need to be understood and interpreted within the life of the Church. The covenant that God offers in the Scriptures is not with the individual, but with the people. The Church is the community of believers, the community of those who respond to the love of God. It is those that have faith, and are living a loving response to God’s love, who can be most open to the divine message of the Scriptures. Just as the Church was the matrix in which the Scriptures were born, so it needs to be the matrix within which we interpret them. The Scriptures need to be read within the faith community.

Lectio divina arises out of a faith relationship with Jesus and reaches its fulfillment in the transformation of that faith

relationship. The Scriptures are more open to those active disciples who love God and who are endeavouring to transform their life in conformity with their faith. It is the heart filled with this loving faith that will be most open to the spiritual message of the Scriptures. Active effort to live a life of Christian virtue is an important preparation for reading the Scriptures.

Lectio Divina Alone

It is our life as disciples of Jesus that brings us to *lectio*: the desire to deepen our intimacy with Jesus in our common journey to the Father. As we begin our *lectio*, we set the scene with a prayer. It can be any prayer. Guigo’s prayer was:

“Lord Jesus, you who are the Son of the Living God, teach me to listen to what you tell me in the holy Scriptures, and to discover your face there”

Reading

We begin by focusing all our attention on the text: the whole text, not just any one word or phrase. We should try to know the text well. The reading can be done in a variety of ways: repeated, aloud, with a pencil in hand if it helps. Look at the characters, their actions and words; note the context, related texts and any quotes that might occur. Here, we are focusing on the text in itself, what the author is presenting. We are gathering food for thought. The reading is just the beginning of a process: it is meant to lead to meditation and prayer. It is their necessary presupposition

Meditation

Meditation brings to bear our reason on the text. We look at the text in terms of ourselves. It is here that we come to understand, appreciate and appropriate the divine mysteries that we read about in the Sacred Scriptures. In Meditation, the divine word and our personal faith life come together. There is an interaction, and an integration, of the Word and the person.

We not only learn about God but also about ourselves. Here we can learn about the God who loves us and calls us to love in return. Here we can look at our own life in terms of the expectations of our divine lover, and see what we need to do to transform our life.

We can ask four questions to help us in our meditation:

What does the text tell me

- about the God who speaks to me?
- about how I should respond to that God
- about my faith life?
- about what I need to do to transform my faith life?

The outcome of our meditation is what we need to do to transform our life according to the expectations of God. We are humbled in realising that we cannot do it without the help of God. Thus, the meditation flows naturally into prayer. Meditation moves the will to prayer and strengthens its resolve to transform the life of discipleship.

Prayer

The prayer arises from our reflection on the text. It is focused particularly on what we need to do to transform our life. We humbly ask God to give us the grace to do what needs to be done. This prayer is the climax of the process that began

with the reading. It is this reading, meditating and prayer that is the normal way that God draws us to contemplation. The author of the Cloud of Unknowing, writing about the way to contemplation, looks to the teaching of Guigo;

“So I want you to understand clearly that for beginners and those a little advanced in contemplation, reading or hearing the word of God must precede pondering it and with out time given to serious reflection there will be no genuine prayer”.

Contemplation

Since the word “contemplation” is used in a variety of ways, it is necessary to define it when we use it. We are following Guigo, for whom “contemplation” refers to a gift of God that is beyond what we can do by ourselves. We cannot alone achieve this contemplation, therefore we should not expect it to happen, as if it were a natural outgrowth of our own spiritual progress. It is a gift of God given when, where, and to whom God chooses to give it. If God bestows this gift, it will break into our prayer: God rushes to us as the father of the prodigal rushed to meet his son. We should not stop or dwell here, unless God intervenes.

Action

Lectio leads to transformation of life. Guigo puts it well, “What use is it to anyone if he sees in his meditation what is to be done, unless the help of prayer and the grace of God enable him to achieve it?” Our *lectio* needs to carry over into our life and affect it in the areas that have arisen in meditation. To achieve this it can be helpful to select from the text a word, phrase or sentence that can be repeated throughout the day. It reminds us of the experience of our prayer and helps us especially when the particular issue that

arose is present. This simple practice extends our prayer throughout the whole day. It fulfills the advice given by John Cassian “ Daily and hourly till the soil of the heart with the Gospel plough.”

Lectio Divina Together

Lectio is especially useful when it is shared with others. The basic pattern is the same, but it is enriched by the sharing of the members of the group. It is still a uniquely personal thing, but there is an appropriate sharing of the personal experience. The following suggests a way of sharing *lectio*, but it should be applied according to the desires of the group. Groups will find their own unique way of doing *lectio* together. The following suggestions may be of assistance. If the members of the group have done a *lectio* on the text before the group meeting, the following suggestion could be followed. If not, there would need to be some times of silence for each member to process the particular stages.

1. The opening prayer could be said by all.
2. In the reading, it would be helpful for each member to comment on what they have seen in the text. It often happens that an individual see something that others have missed. It can help to get a better appreciation of the text.

3. In the meditation, it would be helpful to respond to the four questions proposed in this section. The comments of each should be seen as a personal sharing of faith, not a contribution to a discussion. A prayerful atmosphere needs to be maintained. Care needs to be taken that members of the prayer group are not pressured to share beyond what they wish to.
4. The prayer of each person is naturally very personal, but even that can be shared if the members of the group choose to do it. It can move the group to a deeper bond and create a context in which the group can more easily engage in *lectio*.
5. In the action stage, the members of the group could share the word, phrase or sentence they have chosen. It would not be necessary to explain why they have chosen it.
6. A concluding prayer could be shared by all.