

2. Exploring Prayer: 'Praying the Scriptures' - *Lectio Divina*



We can read the Bible in various ways. We can study it from different angles: as history, telling us about other times and other peoples, as great literature, as poetry, or perhaps as wonderful stories. We can also see it as giving us insight into different aspects of the human condition and helping us to understand how people work – and of course it's a resource for developing theology, and for crafting sermons and messages. And all of these things are good. They have one thing in common with each other: they're all about reading for information.

There is, however, another way of reading Scripture: reading for transformation: reading it so that it changes us and deepens our relationship with God. The difference between these two types of reading is the difference between reading a newspaper and reading a love letter. In the first, you want to find out what's going on in the areas that interest you, and because you want to be informed. Perhaps you'll read some articles in depth, and others you'll just skim and then move on to the crossword. Reading a love letter is quite different: it's a message written just for you from someone who loves you and cares about you. You read it slower, and reread bits of it, and maybe think about it as you go about the day. We can also read scripture like this. It's called *Lectio Divina* (literally: spiritual or sacred reading).

Lectio Divina is an ancient Christian practice that probably started with the monks and nuns who lived in the desert in the first Christian centuries. By reading the Bible very slowly, prayerfully and thoroughly, it helps us listen for the still, small voice of God – the voice that comes in “in a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12). It's not 'study', where for example we get information from say commentaries to help us interpret what we read. Rather it's about letting the mind descend into the heart so that both our minds and our hearts are drawn into God's love and goodness. It's about immersing ourselves in God's word, and reading it as a very personal message – a love letter to us from God. When we read like this, we are like the boy Samuel, approaching Scripture in a spirit of openness, and waiting for something precious: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9). *Lectio Divina* combines reading and silence – silence while we listen to what God might be saying to us. When we read the Scriptures like this we aren't trying to figure it out or analyse the passage. We're reading it for relationship – for deepening our relationship with God and allowing God to transform us. It's something for us to respond to.

How To – Step by Step

As it's been taught over the centuries, *Lectio Divina* has four basic elements to it (although there are many variations on them). It's best to set aside 15-30 minutes for this.

In preparation: Choose a short passage of Scripture – about 6-8 verses works well (sometimes a bit longer if it's a story). Then begin with a time of silent preparation while you quieten yourself in God's presence (perhaps use the simple breathing exercise explained session 1), putting aside the rush and busyness of the day and the other things that compete for your attention. Ask God to be with you – in your heart and your mind, and then to follow these four steps.

1. ***LECTIO – 'READING':*** Read the Bible passage. Do this at least a couple of times (perhaps several), reading slowly, patiently and deliberately. Whatever you do, don't rush through it.

Allow yourself to sink into the words. Don't try to work out what they mean, just let them wash over you, and gradually enter into you. As you go through this stage, you will find that a word, a few words, a phrase, a sentence, stands out for you – that somehow appeals to you. Put another way: what leaps off the page? Remain with the word or phrase or sentence, savouring it without trying to figure out why you've latched onto it. Just stay with it. Someone has described it as like sucking a boiled sweet. Don't try to analyse the phrase just as you wouldn't break up the sweet and subject it to chemical analysis before tasting. You just roll the sweet around in the mouth and enjoy the taste, gently sucking it.

2. ***MEDITATIO – 'MEDITATION' OR 'REFLECTING':*** Now ponder the word or the phrase that stands out for you – quietly reflect on what you are hearing. What is it saying to me? What do I experience or feel as I savour this word? How is it connected to my life? Don't try to work out the usual things we do in Bible study – we're not concerned with who the passage is designed for, or what the writer meant, or what the context is. We're more listening for what God is offering us through this passage in the Bible. This is a gift from God to you at this time. A question to ask yourself is: 'What does this Word mean for my life?' Is it offering you something, asking something of you, calling you to do something? How is your life being touched by this word? What might God be saying to me; offering me? Is God inviting me to offer something to others – inviting me to do something, to be something, to work on something, to change something in me?

3. **ORATIO – ‘PRAYER’:** Talk to God, honestly and openly, about what you are experiencing – about what is happening for you. God wants you to hear about you and your life at this time. If you experience some emotion (joy, pain, delight, anger, thankfulness, hurt) tell God about it. Share it with God. Whatever it is, keep responding to God about it. Your prayer may be that of thanksgiving, petition, intercession, lament or praise. Some people find it helpful to write down the thoughts that come their way. Sometimes silence will be the right response.
4. **CONTEMPLATIO – ‘CONTEMPLATION’ OR ‘RESTING’:** Rest with God. Allow yourself to simply be with God – to be with God’s love and peace. This is about God looking at you and you looking at God. It’s a close sharing between friends. It’s deep, intimate, sometimes tearful, and often too deep for words. As you rest with God, the Spirit will help you to respond to what you have experienced and give you the grace to faithfully carry out what you’ve heard or experienced during this time.

Often, the word that has been with you during this time will stay in your head or heart for a day or so. Pray the word. Carry it around with you and live it out.

These four steps of *Lectio Divina* may not always follow a straight line. Allow yourself freedom. The aim is to move into the depths of silence and stillness where you can hear the Word of God spoken to you in love and respond to this Word with your love and your life.

It’s that easy, and that hard. The early desert monks and nuns knew that this practice changed their lives. And many people today find that it’s truly transformative. Really sitting with God, really listening, really offering your heart, mind and body to God means that you are open to all God is offering and asking of you.

Experiencing Lectio Divina:

Take one of these passages, and follow the process through. Give yourself at least 15 – 20 minutes, so take it slowly, and listen to what God is saying to you.

As a reminder here's a summary of the steps:

In preparation: Choose a passage of Scripture and then quieten yourself in God's presence. Ask God to be with you – in your heart and your mind.

1. **READING:** Read the Bible passage at least a couple of times – slowly and silently. What leaps off the page? Remain with the word or phrase or sentence and savour it.
2. **REFLECTING:** Ponder the word or the phrase that stands out for you – reflect on what you're hearing. What is it saying to me? How is that connected to my life?
3. **PRAYER:** Talk to God, honestly and openly, about what you are experiencing.
4. **RESTING:** Rest with God. Hear the word or words as a gift from God. Enjoy God's company and allow the Spirit to give you the grace to respond to / to carry out what you have experienced and heard.

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

John 15:9-13

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Psalm 139:1-6

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

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