

Lectio Divina

How do I begin to read the Bible from that deeper wisdom perspective? A very good question! Many people feel intimidated diving into the scripture by themselves; convince that one must be a biblical scholar to have authority to proceed. But this simply isn't so. For fifteen hundred years Christian monks—and now increasing numbers of lay people—have been using a practice called *lectio divina* (Latin for 'sacred reading') to carry them deeply into their own heart-knowing. It's a simple yet profound way of praying the scripture (as in pondering it), but ruminating it like a cow chewing it cud. Lectio Divina is a time tested way of "chewing scripture" – feeding on it, absorbing it deeply into one's being where, like all food, it provides nurturance and the energy for growth.

This implies, of course, that scripture is food – and that is indeed the underlying presupposition in lectio divina. The practice is based on the wager that scripture is a living word – not just history, not just facts and figures you can read in the book, but a source of ongoing personal guidance that can seek in your heart here and now, offering insight and uncannily timely assistance. I used the word "wager" deliberately, for as in all wisdom work, nothing is to be accepted on blind faith. But people who work with *lectio divina* on a regular basis report overwhelmingly that the wager holds true. If you open yourself to this practice with any degree of inner receptivity, it is amazing how often you will be led to exactly what you need to hear at the moment or exactly the kick in the pants you need to get you moving.

In *lectio divina* you work intensely with a short scriptural passage in four distinct steps called *lectio* (reading), *Meditatio* (reflection), *Oratio* (prayer), and *Contemplatio* (contemplation). These steps are usually presented as sequential, although this is by no means an ironclad rule. Experienced practitioners will often experience *lectio* as essentially a circular process,

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with the steps unfolding in any order. As we begin to acquaint ourselves with the practice, however, it makes sense to keep them in the traditional sequence.

Living Water

For our first walk through, let's work with a portion of John 4, the dialogue between Jesus and the woman at the well that we first explored all the way back in chapter 1. Collect yourself with a moment of silence or a brief prayer, and then read the following passage slowly and, if possible, aloud. As your eyes moves over the page, allow yourself to be drawn to a sentence, a phrase, or even a single word that somehow seems to pique your interest or curiosity. Here is the text:

Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciple had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans,) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty, or have to keep coming here to draw water."

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This slow, attentive reading is called *lectio*, the first step in the process. If you wish to, pause for a moment of silence, then read it again. While you are reading you are also actively listening.

Getting the knack of this first step is a matter of learning to follow the movement of your own spirit as it draws you to the specific nugget of the text that will furnish your daily bread. Perhaps it's Jesus striking assurance, "Those who drink of the water I give them will never be thirsty," or those beautiful words the woman speaks in response: "Give me this water so that I may never be thirsty." Perhaps it's something simpler, like the phrase "living water," or even something out of left field, like the words, "Sir, you have no bucket." The important point is not what you're struck by, but that you're struck by it –that is, your willingness to trust that as you open to the passage in this deeply listening and receptive way, something will indeed be calling. Stick with it; follow its lead.

Engaging the Text

The second step in *Lectio* is known as *Meditatio*, or "meditation," which in the spiritual vocabulary of the West has traditionally meant focused mental reflection. In this stage you quietly allow your faculties – your reason, your imagination, your memory and your emotions – to begin to work with the passage. The process will be a bit different each time. Sometimes the passage you're working with might trigger an association from your own life; it might stimulate your thought or confuse you, or even make you angry. See if you can discover why. Or you might be struck by a certain word play or turn of phrase or compelling image – "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life," for example. Another very effective way of working with text is

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to role play one of the characters. Imagine yourself as the women at the well and see if you can follow her movements internally at each step in this remarkable dialogue. Or picture yourself in the role of Jesus (what better way to put on the mind of Christ?) and see where it leads you. Suppose, for example, that you hear yourself forming the words, "Give me a drink," and are suddenly struck by the notion, "Hummm . . . even Jesus got thirsty from time to time. Did he really have human needs? Is there something that he needs from us? From me?"

These are just a few suggestions to help you find your own way into meditation. Whatever catches your attention, stay with it and work with it. Bring all your imagination to bear upon it. But remember, this is not biblical research. Don't reach for the scholarly commentaries or concordances—not now, anyway. This practice is not about acquiring information or learning what experts have to say; it is about allowing the text to break open and resonate in the authority of your own heart.

The third stage in the process is called *Oratio*, which in Latin means "prayer." If feelings arise in you out of heart-to-heart encounter with scripture, let the feelings happen. Sit with them quietly and see if they want to shape themselves into prayer. You might discover, for example, that words, "Give me water, so that I may never be thirsty" exactly express your own deepest spiritual yearning. Pray them that way, then; let them become the words of your own heart. Or perhaps something in the text will move you deeply or even fill you with tears of remorse or gratitude. Say, for example, that you are pondering the notion, "Does Jesus really need something from me?" Suddenly you are struck by the realization that there is a deep mutuality in the encounter; your gift counts. A sense of intimacy floods through your being, and you are filled with gratitude. Let the feelings flow; this *Oratio* at its exquisite best, the moment when, in St Paul's words, Notes from Chapter 13 of "The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—a New Perspective on Christ and His Message" by Cynthia Bourgeault.

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the spirit begins to pray within you. (And remember, a prayer doesn't always have to be in words; the feelings themselves can be a prayer.)

Sometimes this moment just doesn't happen. You'll sit with a passage, and even though you've given it your very best, it still doesn't move you to prayer. Don't worry. Don't fake it; don't force yourself to have an emotional encounter with the text if the feeling simply is not there. If nothing is stirring for you in the Oratio department to day, just go on to the next step.

"Resting in God"

The final step in *lectio divina* is known as *Contemplatio*, which in monastic tradition is traditionally described as "resting in God." The phrase itself comes from the sixth-century church father St. Gregory the Great, but the feeling it evokes harkens back to a much more ancient text, Psalm 131, which monks to this day are fond of quoting to describe the essence of *Contemplatio*:

O Lord, I am not proud; I have no haughty looks.

I do not occupy myself with great matters, Or with things that are too hard for me.

But I still my soul and make it quiet, Like a [weaned] child upon its mother's breast;

My soul is quieted within me

A weaned child on its mother's lap is no longer hungry; filled to satisfaction, it merely rests and allows digestion to take place. In exactly the same way, at this stage of *lectio* you suspend all mental and emotional activity and simply

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“rest” in the fullness of the feast. The digestive work goes on beneath the level of your conscious mind.

If you think this step sounds a bit like Centering Prayer, you are exactly right. When Father Thomas Keating and his monastic brethren at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Massachusetts first developed the practice during the mid 1970s, they saw themselves as essentially extrapolating the silent resting of the fourth stage of lectio and reframing it as a stand-alone meditation practice. If you have the time available to you, you can certainly practice Centering Prayer within its original monastic niche, and the fruits are palpable. But as is always the case when monastic practice is explored into the very different circumstances of secular life, sustainability needs to be your bottom line. Don’t bite off more than you can chew.

Speaking of which, how much time needs to be allotted for this practice? Classically a monk will work with lectio for one or even two hours in his or her cell, going through the steps not just once but sometimes several times, and not necessarily in any set order. While lectio, *Meditatio*, *Oratio*, *Contemplatio*, is the traditional sequence, experienced practitioners tend to follow the movement of the spirit, weaving between the steps in a wonderful fluid way. Sometimes meditation will lead directly to *Contemplatio*, then back to *Oratio* as the silent depths fashion the prayer of the heart. Occasionally lectio will lead straight to *Oratio*, then slowly release you back to *Contemplatio*. Once you get the hang of it, it’s like dancing with an invisible partner. If you have half an hour a day to give to this practice, or even half hour every other day, you’ll begin to see dramatic differences in your intimacy level with scripture. Those words and images you chew on during your time of lectio will continue to percolate beneath the surface of your day, shaping what you see and do in ways you could never have imagined.

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Incidentally, the passage we just worked with is at the absolute maximum end of the spectrum in terms of length. You could cut it in half, and it would still be more than ample as a lectio text. I know many monks who work with a single sentence—or even a single word—sometimes for days, until the text finally reveals its hidden treasure. Generally three or four sentences are ideal.

Ending these notes, one last paragraph from the chapter . . .

Traditionally when monks speak of *lectio divina*, they have in mind that book you are working with is the Bible. Other sources, no matter how worthy or enlightening, do not officially qualify as lectio text. Of course all things change, and the traditional practice of lectio development in an era far less culturally and inter-spiritually open than our own. Certainly you can take the basic practice of attentive inner listening and use it with any sacred text of the Christian tradition or any spiritual tradition. It's magical to do lectio with Rumi, with the Dhammapada (the saying of the Buddha), with the Upanishads, or with the Gospel of Thomas. In that sense the practice is generic and transferable to any texts that deeply touch your heart. But it is important to keep in mind that if you are walking the Christian path, the Bible has a special preeminence. It has been "living water" for generation upon generation of Christian saints and seekers, the context within which the Christian conversation unfolds. To truly receive into yourself the cumulative wisdom of the tradition really asks you to give primary attention to Bible as the mainstay of your *lectio divina*.