

## Listening to the Bible as God's word to us

Perhaps the first thing to say about 'Lectio Divina' is that it is a way of listening to the Bible rather than a way of reading it.

And, to tell the truth, rather than listening to the Bible as such, we are trying to listen to God whom we believe addresses us in the Bible, and where we can best learn to understand the language of God and his ways among us. In fact, it is probably safer to think of lectio divina as a way of praying rather than of reading. In my own experience, I can certainly say that when prayer is tough going I have found guidance and encouragement from paying more attention to lectio divina: it is the best way I know of deepening my ability to listen to God and to open my rather stony heart to him in prayer.

The point about listening is simply one of perspective. Reading focuses on ourselves as readers, not on God who is speaking to us. Although lectio divina is characteristically grounded on reading the Bible, we have to unlearn many of the ways of reading we are taught and pick up in daily life nowadays. One is our habit of not reading: we are flooded with texts of all kinds now, and so often we are just skimming them to see if we need to bother with them at all, or what is the 'take home message' or 'bottom line'. Even long novels we read rather to fill up dead time, to take our minds off things, and we so often just look for the exciting bits or whatever we are interested in. Rarely do we expect texts to have much to say; and even less often do we expect a text to make demands on us, let alone to change us. In terms of reading, lectio divina is most of all like reading a poem, where you have to work with the words, and let the sounds, rhythm of the language play in the imagination, allowing unexpected associations to register there, in order to begin to release the meaning of the text to be released, and let it begin to bear fruit in our minds. Someone likened the effect of lectio divina to reading a book but gradually being aware that the book is reading us.

But to say so much is to ignore as yet the fact that lectio divina is really about learning to listen to a meaning, and a level of communication, where God is the person addressing us. I do not actually think that listening to God is at rock bottom very different to listening to anyone else. Learning to listen is always a matter of developing our capacity for personal relationship, and the maturing of our self-awareness. These are the real skills needed for fruitful lectio divina.

Talking so bluntly in terms of the Bible as the word of God is dangerous talk: it is too easy to oversimplify and crudely to identify the human text with divine authority. We need to bear in mind too that the Bible is actually an extraordinary and unique collection of human texts, and all the skills needed to understand this variety of human texts are relevant and necessary to educate our reading ability of the

DAVID FOSTER is the Prior and Novice Master at Downside Abbey near Bath. He has written a book on Lectio Divina entitled *Reading with God: Lectio Divina* (London: Continuum, 2005). He is also the author of *Deep Calls to Deep: Going Further in Prayer* (forthcoming Spring 2008, Continuum).

Bible. But lectio divina moves beyond reading the Bible to listening to it as God's word to us, spoken through these texts. There is a deeper level of communication going on, and we have to learn to tune into that. And it is worth remembering that God does not speak to us independently of the Church; we listen as members of the body of Christ, and it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus pours out in our hearts that we are able to tune into the Scriptures at the deeper level of the Spirit, and listen in them to the Father addressing us as his beloved children.

Frankly, of course, many biblical texts are all too human. This must force us to distinguish between what the human writers or the people they are recording say and do, and the ways in which we accept the passages in question as divine revelation. A helpful way of dealing with this is to bear in mind that the Bible contains the story of a people's discovery of the true God, a story as faltering as our efforts to find him in our lives. It is the story of how human beings came to understand God as the God who continually reached out to them, in spite of all their backsliding, evasions and outright sin. It is a story that is still being written in our own lives, but which does not prevent God from taking the initiative to bring us back to himself, and to educate us in his faithful loving kindness.

In a famous discussion of lectio divina by the Carthusian monk Guigo II, the process of prayerful listening to the Bible was being thought of as a four-stage process: reading (lectio), meditation (meditatio), prayer (oratio), contemplation (contemplatio). This can be misleading. As I have just said, listening is a better term than reading because it expresses more clearly the relational character of the activity, its 'shape' as communication, word and response. If we think about this we get a better idea of things. First, we hear a word addressed to us; we take it to heart; the word naturally invites a response, and a response not only to what we have heard, but also to the person who has spoken to us. For me, that is a better way of looking at the process; but it is a single process of communication between God and the human person, not four different operations we do on a text.

To consider the 'shape' of lectio divina in these terms, we need to move our attention onto a different level from our normal ways of reading. However, we need to read the text at a human level, we need to keep our ears open for God. Our ability to do so grows with our ability to tune into his presence more generally in our own lives, in the people we meet and with whom we live or work, as well as in the life and worship of the Church as a whole. It goes hand in hand with the awareness of him we cultivate in prayer. Sometimes we will find ourselves tuning into the actual words of the Bible text, which speak to us very directly. Sometimes we need to listen out for the way the text resonates with ourselves, because they can make us think about our lives from a new more 'godly' angle. Sometimes we need to do a bit more work with a text for it to 'speak' in the relevant kind of way: something puzzles us, some turn of phrase catches out attention, a passage invites us to look at other references or ideas (notes and cross-references in a Bible are helpful here). But always we need to come back to how this text, these words or this episode helps me see my life in the light of faith and in the sight of God.

Sometimes, it has to be said, we listen and are left waiting for a word. But learning to appreciate such a hunger is part of the process of seeking God. In that case we can simply carry on reading, with the ears of our heart pricked. Sometimes we can hear God speaking, as it were, 'out of' the text itself, but often it seems he is coming 'between' us and the text, helping us interpret it as a living word, as Jesus did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus; and sometimes the text helps us listen to God speaking to us more 'inside' ourselves, bringing us back to ourselves and to a sense of how we are in God's presence. It all depends. But once we have noticed something catching our attention, we just have to listen. Is it God speaking to us? We can only listen to find out, and to listen to it in faith, hope and love. God's word will be a word of life, a saving word, a word that confesses Jesus as Lord. Is that how it strikes us? If it is of God, that kind of attention will let it bear fruit.

Listening is not something we do with our ears or even only with our heads; it calls for an openness of heart to the one who is addressing us. Listening is greatly affected by our inner attitudes, by our states of mind and heart. God's voice is not the only one that we are probably listening to, and if we do want to listen to him, we will need to tune out other kinds of interference. A wise listener will be able to tune into what a person cannot put into words, or what they are trying to say but cannot find the right words to express. And there is, beyond the actual utterance, all that it means for the person talking. For that we need an understanding of the person who is addressing us as well as knowledge of their language. This kind of understanding grows through a kind of self-knowing, an ability to pick out resonances,

an empathy for the other, as well as a certain tact and hesitation in exploring possible meanings, to see if they are the correct ones. This calls for a depth in our attention to the words we are listening to as God's Word to us. To be able to receive it we have to take it to heart. Ideally, as in the Parable of the Sower, the word needs to fall into good soil. This is the second stage in the process. There are different practical ways of trying to do this. One of the earliest we know about is simple repetition of the words of the Bible passage, even to learn it by heart so that it continually lives in our minds and is able to feed our hearts. This is still a valid way of feeding on the Bible. But probably modern people will find themselves wanting to think about it more. This thinking should be very personal, and involve the heart rather than the head. God is not addressing our feelings though; an emotional response is not what he wants. Rather, he wants the conversion of our heart, the amendment of our life and our growth in Christian discipleship and holiness. We should not ignore our feelings though about what we read; they are often the best way we will be able to find to the door of our heart. So the way a passage strikes us deep down, its 'gut impact', can sometimes help us find the good soil. We need to try to bring that feeling into clearer focus and listen to it with the words of the Bible, so that we may begin to fine tune what God is saying to us with his word. The key questions will be ones like these: What is the word saying to me? How does it help me see life and my commitments in the light of faith? How does it help me hope in God's promises or accept his love, as well as share it with others around me?

Lectio divina is not simply a matter of answering these questions as if we were in a Bible study group. In response to this kind of thinking we should find ourselves entering into a conversation with God. The natural response we should be making is to turn to God in prayer. It may be prayer of sorrow or of joy; it will probably include a prayer for help, for oneself or for others; and I hope there will also be a time of thanksgiving and praise. The Bible has always been understood as a law of life: it is a source of wisdom and the means whereby God's people have been able to shape their imagination, their sense of identity and hope; but always the reading of the Bible and the cultivation of a love for it has been directed towards putting that law into practice. Prayer for wisdom and discernment about the personal implications of our reading, a renewal of our sense of complete dependence on God's mercy and grace, will surely be a large part of our response. But so too should be a peaceful putting of oneself into God's hands, and a quiet adoration of his presence in our hearts. And this is the last stage of lectio divina. We are just fools if we listen to God speaking to us, if we take his word to heart and respond to it in prayer, but fail to give time to the person who has addressed us in his merciful love.

This can go in two ways. It might be a specific act of thanksgiving and worship, for what we have heard, what we have shared with him, for the chance to see our lives in a different perspective. If we have spent a long time letting the word we have focused on help us review our lives and so on, I think it is important to be particular about ending the time of prayer simply giving glory and thanksgiving to God. But it may be that our response to the word is more directly one of silent contemplative prayer, almost directly as part of the process of taking the word to heart. I am sure that listening to God in lectio divina is the best way we have of learning to grow in prayer and of letting prayer grow into a more contemplative, silent prayer in which we just let God be God in our hearts and minds, and let him take his time to shape us according to his will. But I would just comment that it is sometimes easy to use this as a kind of short cut, and not let the word we are listening to teach us to pay critical attention to ourselves, and how we may be summoned to a more searching kind of discipleship. This is really where lectio divina reaches its natural conclusion, in the simple awareness of God and our offering ourselves again and again to him in prayer and in service.

---

Taken from the article, 'Listening To The Bible As God's Word To Us' by David Foster, published in Bible in TransMission, Spring 2010, and is reproduced here with the permission of Bible Society.

All rights reserved. Permission is given for a single copy to be made for private and personal use. Beyond this, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without prior permission from Bible Society.

For permission requests, please email [permissions@biblesociety.org.uk](mailto:permissions@biblesociety.org.uk) or telephone Bible Society on 01793 418100.