



Understanding the Bible and Deepening Our Faith Study Guides

What is *Lectio Divina*?

Lectio Divina is a contemplative way of reading the Bible. It dates back to the early centuries of the Christian Church and was established as a monastic practice by Benedict in the 6th Century. It is a way of praying the scriptures that leads us deeper into God's word. How can we use this ancient method, today, in our life and our Church?

Maybe the Coronavirus Lockdown and our changing life can help, in a way. As a quick guide, try these simple tips to deepen your understanding with a selected Bible reading:

- *The first thing to do is **slow down**.*
- *Read a short passage from The Bible - from the lectionary (the pre-set readings for the day/week) or use a Concordance (a thesaurus for the Bible) to find a topic of interest and then read that scripture more than once.*
- *Chew it over slowly and carefully.*
- *Savour it. Pray through it - live it.*

Remember, the Bible is the only book that reads YOU. Give it a chance.

Something might just happen - Scripture begins to speak to us in a new way. It speaks to us personally, and aids that union we have with God through Christ who is himself the Living Word. Interestingly, you can read the Bible in different ways in different phases or circumstances of your life - and the Bible reads into you that way too.

"Let us ruminate, and, as it were, chew the cud, that we may have the sweet juice, spiritual effect, marrow, honey, kernel, taste, comfort and consolation of them." A quote from Thomas Crammer from his Homily on Scripture

Fr Christopher Jamison, former Abbot of Worth Abbey in Sussex, in his book *Finding Sanctuary* (2007) writes of three key features of *lectio*:

- The first is that "the text is seen as a gift to be received, not a problem to be dissected..... let the text come to you."
- The second is that the *lectio* tradition "teaches us that in order to receive what the text has to offer we must read slowly."
- The third is that *lectio* is "a way of prayer. Before reading pray that God will speak to you through the text. During reading, allow the reading to evolve into meditation and then into prayer and finally contemplation. When the reading is concluded, keep

some phrase in mind and repeat it throughout the day so that prayerful reading becomes prayerful living.”

So, *lectio* is not Bible study or even an alternative to Bible study but something radically different. The practice understands Scripture as a meeting place for a personal encounter with the Living God. It is a practice we come to with the desire to be changed at all sorts of levels. It operates very much on the emotional rather than the purely cerebral level. It is perhaps *heartly* rather than *heady*. Through it we allow ourselves to be formed in the likeness of Christ; it is about *formation* rather than *instruction*.

If you don't understand or believe that, read the accompanying reflection on *Lectio* from our Reader/Lay Minister, Julia Davis. This is highly recommended.

When undertaken in a group setting *lectio* is about listening to the experience of others and how that might inform your experience. That might be difficult at the moment, but maybe during lockdown we might try to use Zoom or Skype to explore a reading together using these video conferencing methods. If you are interested in doing that, let me know.

How to enter into Lectio Divina

There are a variety of ways you can enter into *Lectio Divina*. Here are two.

1. **A “traditional method”** (the one I was taught at Theological College and has sustained me)

In its updated, popular form, you can find this in a lot of prayer books. I have taken my taught method and based it upon a version I have seen in the Annual ‘Reflections for Daily Prayer Advent’ series, written by Rt Rev Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford, England, soon to be the Archbishop of York:

Make sure you are sitting comfortably.

Breathe slowly and deeply.

Ask God to speak to you through the passage that you are about to read.

This is a way of praying that starts with our silence. We often make the mistake of thinking prayer is about what we say to God. It is actually the other way around. God wants to speak to us. He will do this through the Scriptures. So, don't worry about what to say. Don't worry if nothing jumps out at you at first. God is patient. He will wait for the opportunity to get in. He will give you a word and lead you to understand its meaning for you today.

First reading of the passage

As you read the passage listen for a word or phrase that attracts you. Allow it to arise from the passage as if it is God's word for you today. Sit in silence repeating the word or phrase in your head.

Then say the word or phrase aloud that comes to you.

Second reading of the passage: Ponder

As you read the passage again ask how this word or phrase speaks to your life and why it has connected with you. Ponder it carefully. Don't worry if you get distracted – it may be part of your response to offer it to God. Sit in silence and then frame a single sentence that begins to say aloud what this word or phrase says to you.

Third reading of the passage: Pray

As you read the passage for the last time ask what Christ is calling from you. What is it that you need to do or consider or relinquish or take on as a result of what God is saying to you in this word or phrase? In the silence that follows the reading pray for the grace of the Spirit to plant this word in your heart.

If you are on your own speak your prayer to God either aloud or in the silence of your heart.

If there is time, you may even want to *read the passage a fourth time*, and then end with the same silence before God with which you began.

2. Lambeth Conference Method (2008)

Opening Prayer

O Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that we may embrace and hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

(this was designed for a group but can be done alone or as a couple/family - improvise!)

- One individual reads the passage slowly.
- Each person identifies the word or phrase that catches their attention
- Another person reads the passage slowly (From another translation, if possible)
- Each person identifies where this passage touches their life today
- Passage is read a third time
- Each person names or writes: "From what I've heard and shared, what do I believe God wants me to do or be? Is God inviting me to change in any way?"
- Each shares their answer
- Each prays for the person on their right, naming what was shared in other steps

Close with the Lord's Prayer and silence.

Let me know how you get on, or if you are challenged by this methodology

A personal reflection on the role of Lectio Divina from Julia Davis, Reader in the Old Hills Malvern Churches Benefice

We are living in strange times, with many of us living in isolation. Life changed suddenly, reminding me how twenty years ago my life changed overnight.

It was a Sunday morning and I had got up and made coffee. Taking one into Dad, I found he had died during the night. Feeling numb and not knowing quite what to do I phoned a friend who came round immediately and took control of the situation. Phoning the doctor, undertaker and my cousins to let them know what had happened and sitting me down in the front room, with a slice of toast, saying I had to eat.

After everyone had come and gone and they had taken Dad's body away I sat in the stillness and silence, realising that from now on it would be a solitary life. I picked up my Bible and randomly opened it at any page. It came open at Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, a list of people and circumstances that would be blessed by God.

There it was 'blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted', it was as though God was speaking to me in the quiet and in the stillness.

That is what Lectio Divina is – just fancy words for drawing closer to God. The Bible is a tool, a key that opens the gate that separates us from God. From the very beginning walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden all He wanted was a relationship with us.

It was only towards the end of the middle ages that Lectio Divina fell out of favour and was replaced by more formal prayer. Prior to that it was used widely in the early church. Using a time of silence to reflect on a Bible passage, letting a sentence, phrase or word stand out and connect with life and leading on into informal prayer, that lets our love for God and God's love for us flow into a relationship that is what God had wanted all along.

Every human situation, emotion and relationship is there somewhere in the Bible, so whatever we are going through God can be with us.

Are we stood at the foot of the cross watching someone we love die?

Are we two companions walking along the road to Emmaus feeling despondent and down hearted because what we had hoped for is not going to happen?

Are we in the fishing boat on the sea despairing because there is no catch, so no money or food on the table that day?

Now is the perfect time for Lectio to enter our lives and let God's love for us and our love for God shine through in a prayerful and open relationship.

Julia Davis

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