

Lectio divina was at one time practised by all Christians. but after a long period when it lost its popularity it is now making a strong comeback and is particularly suited to busy people, lay and ordained, who do not live in monasteries but want to raise their minds and hearts to God.

First, it is practical. Like massage or reflexology, lectio is less something we do than something we allow to be done to us: it is accepting the embrace of God. Embraces are good news. The prospect of lectio does not trigger a 'one more thing to do' reluctance: we like to read; we read in trains and planes and on buses. Lectio enables us to go the extra mile by being carried. In lectio we enable God, the subject of the sentence, to reach out to us. We agree to be touched.

Lectio is a particular style of reading: prayerful, meditative, reflective, reverential. It has something in common with sipping wine or reading poetry. To get the hang of it, we may need to adjust our mindset. Modern education encourages us to master and to criticise; for lectio, however, we need to be docile. In lectio we don't so much read the text as allow the text to read us.

We also need to overcome our mistrust of words, a suspicion we have learnt from exposure to empty or manipulative language. We have to abandon this mistrust when we meet the word of God, which does not set out to deceive or stupefy or dominate us. Many people like to sit with the Mass readings of the day and chew on them, pausing at any word or phrase or sentence that offers a supportive resting-place. We should avoid rushing the process. Sometimes in lectio, as for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our hearts will burn within us; at other times we will feel distress, perhaps, or annoyance at, for example, Jesus' seeming rudeness to the Syrophenician woman. This is fine; God speaks not only through the words but also through our responses to the words. Noticing our response is an integral part of the lectio. God is saying something to us about Himself but also something to us about ourselves, and we need to be attentive to both messages.

Often we resist. Unconsciously we can distance ourselves from the texts, treating them as long-ago and faraway documents. The curious truth is that at some level of our being we do not want God. As the Letter to the Hebrews says: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." The good news is that becoming aware of this resistance is already a step in the right direction. The truth may be hard to accept, but it has the power to set us free.

We need to beware of a trap: sometimes we look at the characters in a particular story and identify with only some of them, thus missing important parts of the message. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan has six dramatis personae: the man who was mugged; the brigands who mugged him; the priest; the Levite; the Samaritan; and, finally, the innkeeper. Our knee-jerk reaction is to identify with the good guy, the Samaritan. But perhaps we could let ourselves move between

other characters. Then, perhaps, the truth will emerge that, like the priest and the Levite, we walk past people in need. Perhaps, like the brigands, we lay violent hand on others – not necessarily physically - and leave them wounded. Or perhaps we most closely resemble the man who was mugged, either because we have been wounded by others or because we are the victims of self-inflicted wounds. Or, take the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: truthful lectio makes us aware that, in this life, it is not the case that some of us are sheep and some of us goats; the reality is that all of us are goats but called to be, in the best sense, sheepish.

What we must do is hear the word addressing us personally, here and now. The first step, therefore, is to listen to the text intently, “with the ear of our hearts”, as S. Benedict says. Secondly, when we find a word or a passage that speaks to us, we should allow it to interact with our inner world. At this stage we can discover some surprisingly tender spots within ourselves.

For example, I may be sitting down with Matthew 7.9-10: “Is there anyone among you who would hand their son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when he asked for a fish?” As the minutes pass it dawns on me that despite what I say to others or to myself, the deep-down truth is that when I pray what I actually expect is a stone or a snake, not bread or a fish. Or I expect no answer at all: a stony silence. Therefore rather than experience disappointment, leading to anger against God which I feel is inadmissible, I make no requests at all.

This insight is a painful revelation to me and makes me think hard. How much faith do I really have? What is my deep-down image of God? Am I angry with Him? Have I been angry with Him for some time? These are uncomfortable questions, but the discomfort can be creative because the next step in the process is to take it to God: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” Having done so, I rest in God, accepting His healing touch and loving embrace.

Lectio divina is powerful, life-giving and energising. The text is both a mirror in which I see myself and a window through which I gaze on God. Most important of all, it speaks powerfully to me of God's relationship with me. I am each person in the Gospel: the leper, the blind man, Matthew, Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, the prodigal son; in lectio I can experience, with them, here and now, Jesus' healing word and life-giving touch. Nothing has changed in two thousand years, neither human nature nor God's loving agenda. He invites me to take His gracious words to myself and make them my own: “You are My Son, the beloved; My favour rests on You.” As He did to Mary Magdalene in the garden on the morning of the Resurrection, so He does to me: He calls me by my name.

Extracts from an article by Fr Stephen Ortiger OSB which appeared in The Tablet.