

I have come across this phrase Lectio Divina several times while reading about different ways of meditating and thought I would find out more about its history and relevance today.

Lectio Divina goes back a very long way to the early Church Fathers in about 300 AD. It became a huge part of our monastic tradition, still practised today by Benedictine monks. In 1173, a Carthusian monk called Guigo Cartujo, the ninth prior of the Grande Chartreuse wrote down the four main steps of Lectio Divina in the "Ladder of Monasticism" These steps Lectio (Reading), Meditatio (Meditation), Oratio (Prayer) and Contemplatio (Contemplation) remain central today to the whole contemplative process of sacred reading.

Basically it is a way of meeting with God through reflection and prayer based on the Bible, on Holy Scripture. St Benedict wanted monks to be filled with an awareness of God's loving presence in their lives and to have lives filled with prayer. He wanted the word of God to speak to them in a very personal way so they could have a deeper relationship with Him and they could ultimately become more like Christ in their way of life – in their thinking, their speaking and in their actions. St Paul had described it as "putting on the mind of Christ" Indeed there are many references throughout the Bible to this meditating upon scripture in both the Old and the New Testament.

The German Pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writing in the 1930's said this about Lectio Divina " We ponder the chosen text on the strength that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day... Here we are not expounding (the text) or preparing for a sermon or conducting Bible study of any kind; we are rather waiting for God's word to us ...Often we are so burdened and overwhelmed with other thoughts, images and concerns that it may take a long time before God's Word has swept all else aside and come through. But it will surely come..."(Life Together SCM press 1954) He makes a clear distinction here between study and this kind of contemplation.

From the Book of Proverbs we read Chapter 4 v 20- 23

My child, be attentive to my words;

Incline your ear to my sayings.

Do not let them escape from

Your sight

Keep them within your heart.

For they are life to those who

Find them,

And healing to all their flesh.

Keep your heart with all vigilance,

For from it flow the springs of life.

Paul wrote in Romans chapter 12 v 2

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect”

So the idea is that by practising Lectio Divina on a regular basis you will be helped to see the world through the eyes of Christ and to act as his disciples out in the world – by constant listening, reading and meditating you will be impregnated by the word of God. It sounds wonderful in theory but alas we are but mere humans with all our shortcomings!

Never the less I really think this way of meditation and contemplation is very useful and definitely has a place in our world today after so many centuries. It is simple and easy to do. It is another way of helping to make space in our busy lives to listen to God in silence and without distractions. It can be practised individually or as a group.

Going back to the main steps of Lectio Divina -

- 1 Lectio – Reading Carefully read a small passage- slowly and deliberately- Benedictines traditionally read it four times. You can read it aloud and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Allow the words to really sink into you.
- 2 Meditatio - meditation Ponder on the words and Phrases you have read – some may jump out at you – allow the words to “penetrate your awareness through use of faculties such as imagination, senses, visualization and feelings” Remain open to receiving a meaning and to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you just now at that moment. Have faith that God will speak to you
- 3 Oratio – prayer Respond to the text with a silent prayer to God or by saying aloud a couple of words that come to mind arising from the text.
- 4 Contemplatio - contemplation A time to be still before God and invite Him in. Rest in silence in the presence of God, allow what you have read and felt to be absorbed into you. Rest in love and in His loving embrace. Let go of reasoning and thinking. Allow your hearts and minds to be renewed by His Grace.

Maria Tasto (a sister of St Benedict of Ferdinand 1938 – 2014) described this process as being “Like a four step dance with God- reading, reflecting, responding and resting with His Word . As we enter more fully into the inner rhythm of this dance, we experience an ever – deepening relationship with God’s Word and Spirit”

These four steps can be quite flexible, to be used as guidelines; they are not set in stone. Michael Casey, a Trappist monk wrote “It’s stages are more like the colours of a rainbow than bureaucratic categories. The different moments ebb and flow; sometimes they overlap, at others they drift apart

David Cole – some of us met him a couple of years ago – has added his own fifth step – Relate (relatio ?) – He says you should relate what you have read to your life – you need to apply sacred scripture to the way you live your life, not about trying to be good but he says it is all about having “ a living, breathing relationship with God, a relationship that filters past your meditation moments into the way you live your everyday life” (D Cole The Inner Journey)

Plenty of food for thought.