

## 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. We slow down. We read a short passage more than once. We chew it over slowly and carefully. We savour it. 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.

Thomas Cramner in his Homily on Scripture ended it with an exhortation to read it in this way:

*"Let us ruminare, 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."*

Fr Christopher Jamison, former Abbot of Worth Abbey in Sussex, England in his book *Finding Sanctuary* 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*.

When undertaken in a group setting *lectio* is about listening to the experience of others and how that might inform your experience. It is never about pushing a particular view and is certainly not competitive.

Rev Lindsay Yates, Chaplin at Westcott House, Cambridge, England encourages the use of *lectio* among those training for ordained ministry. Meeting together to engage in *group lectio* enables ordinands to learn a practice which can enhance their own personal prayer time and relationship with God. We take it in turns to lead the sessions and so it also equips them with the skill to lead such prayer groups as they go out into parish ministry. She has found it useful to stress the following with people before attempting *group lectio*:

- It is an ancient method of Praying with Scripture.
- It is based on the belief that Christ is truly present in Scripture and that the reading of Scripture allows God to speak to us.



- It is a receptive way of praying.
- It is related to Biblical interpretation and Biblical scholarship can help us with it but when we engage in *lectio* we are not concerned primarily with ascertaining theological or doctrinal truths but listening to what God is saying to us through the text.
- It is not a discussion and no one comments on what another person shares.
- Group *lectio* involves an invitation to share but sharing is not compulsory.
- In group *lectio* we listen to what is shared in the belief that God communicates with us through what others might say.

## **How to enter into Lectio Divina**

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

- (1) *This is a set of instructions adapted from 'Reflections for Daily Prayer Advent 2012 to Eve of Advent 2013' (CHP 2012 Pgs. 6 & 7) by Rt Rev Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford, England.*

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 round. 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: Listen

*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.*

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 in a group talk for a few minutes and pray with each other.*



*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) *This is a simple approach used in a group situation at the 2008 Lambeth Conference as part of the daily engagement with Scripture suggested this approach.*

### *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.

1. One individual reads the passage slowly.
2. Each person identifies the word or phrase that catches their attention (1 minute)
3. Each shares the word or phrase around the group (3-5 minutes, no discussion)
4. Another person reads the passage slowly (From another translation, if possible)
5. Each person identifies where this passage touches their life today (1 minute)
6. Each shares (3-5 minutes, no discussion)
7. Passage is read a third time (Another reader and translation if possible. Or even another language)
8. 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? (5 minutes)
9. Each shares their answer (5-10 minutes, no discussion)
10. Each prays for the person on their right, naming what was shared in other steps. (5 minutes)

Close with the Lord's Prayer and silence.

For further insights into Lectio Divina see:

Luke Dysinger OSB's booklet [Accepting the Embrace of God: the Ancient Art of Lectio Divina](#) which can be downloaded.

Fr Christopher Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life*, Phoenix 2007

From Christopher Jamison's book also see his lectio divina meditation on the [Prodigal Son](#)



## Comments by those who have used Lectio Divina

The Church of England's House and College of Bishops has used this way of engaging with Scripture at their meetings:

*"My own view would be that Lectio Divina is a useful devotional approach to Scripture and it is good to use this method in some circumstances. It has a democratic feel about it in that the key question concerns how each individual responds to the text, so everyone's response has equal validity. There is also value in hearing the insights of others, and this can be very illuminating and challenging when others draw fresh insights from familiar parts of the Bible.*

*However, I do think Lectio Divina has its limitations and would be unhappy if we continued to use this as the main way of engaging with Scripture in the College of Bishops, without exploring other approaches. There are obvious shortcomings in an interpretative approach that often focuses on single words which people sometimes reflect on without much acknowledgement of their context in the text in question. Some passages of Scripture invite more critical engagement and raise historical or theological questions which it is hard to address in a purely devotional context"*

*"I have found it refreshingly simple and invariably illuminating – an excellent method for Bishops to employ both when together and in their dioceses"*

*"I have been a member of the House of Bishops since 1995 and a member of the College since early 1993 so it is now twenty-one years since I first attended one of these meetings as a Bishop. When I reflect on this it does seem to me odd that for most of that time when the bishops met they did not study the bible at all. So the introduction of Lectio Divina moved us forward, and the way in which this has sometimes been done alongside saying the Office in groups preparatory to Lectio Divina has also seemed to me a step forward.*

*I notice that we were much more disciplined when this was introduced whereas now the general discussion tends to open up rather more quickly and people break the rules. That means that bishops go off at different tangents and we move quite some distance from the scripture passage itself. While that may sometimes be enriching it often degenerates into general discussion. I believe it was more valuable to focus in a more disciplined way upon the passage of scripture and to pray it (sense the silences) so that we did not quickly get on to whatever was on our minds at the time."*

*"I find Lectio Divine occasionally inspiring and helpful but more often frustrating and annoying. The temptation to take words and ideas out of context, and not to pay deep attention to what the whole passage is saying, is just too powerful. We end up with shared meditations, sometimes valuable in themselves, but I don't feel that we are really sitting under the word".*



The approach has also been introduced for use in a number of dioceses. Comment from one of these, Gloucester, England, are illustrative:

*"I think it has indeed proved to be a very good tool for Bible study in the diocese over the past few years.*

*Like all good new ideas(new in terms of its use today) it can be overused and we may have overdone things a bit, such that, now its use seems to have been fairly severely curtailed at larger gatherings.*

*Certainly, the use of Lectio Divina has been appreciated by clergy and lay people as a way to really focus closely on one smallish piece of text .... it has enabled a feeling of mutuality in the small groups which is helped by the fact that what we bring to the text, and what emerges in words and phrases for each person, is heard and valued. One of its strengths is, therefore, that everyone can participate in some way without feeling that their choices and insights will be judged or heavily analysed"*

*"I should like to report on the affect that Lectio Divina has had on the life of a member of our congregation. David has one of the more severe forms of Tinitus – indeed it is so bad that it isn't uncommon for people at that level of pain to have the desire to commit suicide. He finds going to Church very difficult due to the way the building carries sound thereby making the noises in his head denser. And he's found it difficult to pray because he feels the noises in his head would overtake his attempts to pray. Wonderfully David has found that he can pray by focussing in on a sentence, or a word and shutting all else out. This of course is Lectio Divina and David is delighted to have found it this helpful. There is now a new form of therapy in this field which uses this method of focussing in on a thought, words etc."*

*"The most effective session I had with Lectio Divina was when I was leading a Mothers' Union Quiet Day..... The group really engaged and some of the responses were very, very moving. This was because there were some members in the group who clearly reflected a lot on scripture and had a lot to offer, which in turn sparked others to speak. Afterwards, some of the members told me how helpful the session had been and it was far better than just listening to me giving them an address. They really appreciated the active participation."*

