

The Power of the Pause

The Latin phrase “lectio divina” literally means divine reading and refers to a particular way of reading and reflecting on scripture (in particular) which I would like to explain in this hand-out. As a basis for this, I’m going to use the session we spent on a passage from St Matthew’s gospel during our recent retreat. But a couple of other thoughts first...

St Isaac of Syria wrote:

‘In everything you meet within the Scriptures, strive to find the purpose of the word, to penetrate into the depth of thought of the saints and to understand it more exactly. Those whose life is guided by Divine grace towards enlightenment, always feel as though some inner ray of light travels over the written lines and allows the mind to discern from the bare words what is said with great thought for the instruction of the soul.’

This is also the purpose of pausing between our scripture readings at Mass. We haven’t anywhere near the time (or at least people wouldn’t generally be willing to spend the time) that it would take to adequately reflect on the word that we hear in the readings, but by at least pausing between them it gives us the chance to reflect on what we have heard, and for that word to sink in a little, before moving on. We are, of course, encouraged to return to the readings in our prayer later in the day.

When we pray with scripture using “lectio divina” as a method, what we do is to initially read the passage and then go back and work through it sentence by sentence, sometimes even word by word, depending on how the reading strikes us (or how the Spirit takes us), dwelling on certain words or phrases and reflecting on them and drawing thoughts from them for however long it takes. It may in fact be that we never get through the whole passage the second time around, but that’s OK. The gospel passage from St Matthew below takes about a minute to read, but in our retreat session we spent a further hour-and-a-half reflecting, as a group, on the content of the reading. That’s what “lectio divina” is all about.

What I’d like to do is, firstly, give you the gospel passage to read through and then, secondly, to try to set out the way in which our group reflected on it and the thoughts that resulted from that process. Obviously you can apply this method of prayer to any passage from scripture, long or short, and hopefully it will help you to discover new depths to the word of God and new insights and reflections.

Jesus left Gennesaret and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting, ‘Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil.’ But he answered her not a word. And his disciples went and pleaded with him, ‘Give her what she wants,’ they said “because she is shouting after us.’ He said in reply, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel’. But the woman had come up and was kneeling at his feet. ‘Lord,” she said ‘help me.’ He replied, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the house-

dogs'. She retorted, 'Ah yes, sir; but even the house-dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master's table'. Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.' And from that moment her daughter was well again. (Mt 15 v 21-28)

Jesus left Gennesaret

How did those he left behind feel? – unsure, abandoned, bereaved? or inspired, encouraged, glad (no longer threatened by the challenge of his presence)?

and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

Why did he withdraw? Perhaps he was exhausted and needed to recharge his batteries spiritually and physically. (We need to allow Jesus to be human and to perhaps experience some of the same mental and physical limitations we do.) Perhaps he needed to preach the gospel elsewhere – crossing borders into Gentile areas. Do we need to answer the same challenge in bearing witness to the gospel in unfamiliar, even threatening, situations? Do we need to recharge our batteries in preparation? If so, how do we do that?

Then out came a Canaanite woman...

From where did she come out? - presumably from her house. Perhaps someone had told her that Jesus would be passing...her daughter needed healing and somehow she had confidence that he could help – perhaps she had heard of his miracle-working. How long had she been waiting? In tending to her daughter's needs, was she afraid she might have missed him? Would he help her/could he help her? – she was a pagan Gentile. Suddenly, through the window, she sees him pass by in the street. Of all the people passing by, how did she know it was Jesus? She drops everything and dashes outside, shouting after him to get his attention.

Sir, Son of David

She had done her homework; she knew how to get his attention. She first addresses him as 'Sir' – official and polite – then as 'Son of David' – his Jewish title (from her as a Gentile).

take pity on me

She asks him to take pity on her but, therefore, on her daughter also. 'Take pity' – she had nothing, she could offer nothing in exchange, she was from the "wrong postcode" and a woman and yet courageous enough to speak to this Jewish man.

My daughter is tormented by a devil.

a devil, not the devil - is there a significance in that? We may not always be attacked or tempted by *the* devil, but how many are our "demons"? And she is tormented – something that is there all the time, every waking moment, threatening her health perhaps even her life, demanding her mother's care and vigilance round the clock. How many carers are in such a situation and are in great need of the same help and relief for themselves that the woman sought from Jesus?

But he answered her not a word.

Why? This doesn't sit very comfortably with our image of Jesus but, again, perhaps we have to allow his humanity to come out. He was exhausted from the constant demands being placed on his time and on him personally. He needed some time to himself and now here was yet another demand being made. Perhaps he was at the end of his tether. Certainly we can sympathise with Jesus in a situation like this. How do we so often react? Or perhaps he was just taking a moment to be able to respond calmly and compassionately.

his disciples went and pleaded with him

Maybe they'd been walking ahead of him and suddenly realised he wasn't with them anymore. Looking back when they heard the shouts of the woman, they found she had stopped Jesus and now they had to go back to try to rescue him. They tell him to give her what she wants so they can get rid of the nuisance she was creating – they were flagging also.

I was sent

'sent' as if it wasn't his choice. How do we handle "being sent"? How do we come to terms with, and accept, God's will to go and do things we'd rather not do, or that we'd rather leave to others? (Also a useful reflection for a priest who may find himself appointed to a parish he might not want to go to, leaving behind somewhere comfortable where he would prefer to stay)

the lost sheep of the House of Israel

What does Jesus mean by "lost sheep" - who were the "lost sheep" of his day? Who are they in our own day? – non-Christians? non-Catholics? the lapsed? sinners? Do we ever say "Us"? Can we admit our need to be rescued, saved?

Lord

This time she uses his theological title... a possible sign of her faith in who he is.

help me

and, again, her daughter. To help her is to help her daughter and vice-versa. If Jesus helps you, does he help your family? If he helps your family does he help you?

It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs...

We may find this sentence shocking - was Jesus actually calling the woman a house-dog? We would prefer to think not and we look for another interpretation. It is often suggested that he may have been testing her faith... what would this say about our concept of a God who would take delight in testing those he loves and who come to him in faith? Jesus is actually quoting a proverb (one with which we are unfamiliar) and there may be a little humour in the exchange between them – and he would admire the woman's ability to match riddle for riddle. In any case he uses the "softer" form of the word for dog: "little" or "pet".

She has also returned to using his polite title, 'Sir'. Is she annoyed by what he has said and has returned to being formally polite? Perhaps not, because it hasn't dented her intention or her faith.

Woman, you have great faith

not because she “passed the test”, but because she recognised who Jesus was, her persistence, and her trust that he would respond to her request. Instantly her daughter was cured.

Our retreat director had earlier told us the story of a young boy who used to pass a sculptor’s workshop on his way to school. One day curiosity got the better of him and he decided to look inside and see what was going on. The sculptor was about to start work on a large, cold block of marble. The boy left. Several weeks later he was again passing by when he remembered his previous visit and once again stuck his head in to see what was going on. The sculptor was just finishing off the carving of a beautiful lion. The boy was amazed and had just one question for the sculptor: ‘How did you know the lion was inside the block of marble?’

Working through that “lectio divina” we could say that Jesus brought out of the situation the beautiful lion – he brought faith out of the woman and brought wholeness to her daughter. By the same token it might be said that the woman brought the beautiful lion out of Jesus by reawakening his compassion when he was exhausted and drained from his ministry.

We do ourselves a very real disservice when we switch off because we have heard a particular gospel passage so often before. We need to read/listen to it differently in order to get more from it no matter how familiar it may be. It’s an encounter with the word of God. We need to employ “the power of the pause” which permits reflection. We have to read ourselves into the gospel passage, be there watching and listening, reflecting on what was said and done. Can I apply it to me and my situation?

Yes, it’s a time-consuming process and takes far longer than a cursory read would take. But this is the word of God - could there be anything more worthy of our time? Could time be better spent? And it is also prayer – time spent with God. Could time be better spent? How many times have you met the risen Christ recently? How many times has he tried to speak to you? In prayer – and in particular in “lectio divina” - we can do both things at the same time: meeting Our Lord in the gospels and, through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, hearing what he is saying to us. It takes time and it requires listening – “the power of the pause”.

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Fr Neil McNicholas