

7 How to Read the Gospels

How we read the gospels is guided by what we understand them to be.

As texts written two thousand years ago, they can be approached simply on their historical basis: as texts written at one point in the past by an author rooted in the times in which he lived.

As such, they are an important historical record.

For those seeking something from the text, they can be a source for understanding early Christian faith, the ideas which existed at that time; how people lived and thought. They can be used to guide the explorations of archaeologists, linguists, and other scholars.

For those seeking faith, they can be a source for learning about Christianity, for reflecting on how the faith of men and women two thousand years ago has been passed on from generation to generation. Among the many diverse Christian voices in our modern world, they can seek in the gospels a simplicity and clarity in understanding Christ's life and teaching.

For those of us with faith, they can be a source of reassurance, a call to **repent** (literally, 'think again'), to reflect on our understanding and challenge our assumptions.

As divinely-inspired Scripture, these texts can be interrogated in mind and heart again and again throughout each and all of our lives; indeed, as Catholic faithful - as Church - this is what we are called to do together, through listening; through reading; through reflecting; through prayer. The mystery of Christ, revealed to us in the gospels, calls us always to **more**: more life; more love; more truth.

The gospel texts can be read in many ways.

As we have done in our earlier sessions, we can examine the texts for their language; we can seek Jesus' own voice among the sayings ascribed to him; we can compare how the different evangelists re-tell events and arrange them differently, and we can reflect on how - perhaps - this offers clues to the human intentions of these authors.

These are ways of the *mind*.

But Christian tradition offers other ways to open these texts to understanding (literally, 'standing beneath'): ways of the **heart**.

It is these which we explore now.

As Christian faithful, we must surely seek to understand the gospel texts *deep in our hearts*, for by that means we discover their deepest meaning and beauty.

This understanding is never superficial: it occurs when we attend to the texts most deeply.

It is - always - something that demands space and silence.

Lectio Divina

*Lectio Divina*¹ is an ancient contemplative way of reading Scripture. Its purpose is to lead us, through slow, prayerful reading, towards deeper understanding, but also, essentially, towards communion with God.

This is not, therefore, merely a *reading technique*, but is, rather, a way of approaching the written text, inviting it to speak deeply to us whilst actively creating the time and space for silence and deep reflection.

This is not a path learned quickly: it is something to be practised; it is something into which we ourselves grow.

The rewards of lectio divina are immense: not only do we ourselves learn to slow down, but we gradually learn to open our whole selves to God's Word contained in the Scriptures. We become more contemplative in approaching our lives and their daily challenges, and we learn to allow space to others, and to situations, to speak to us of God and of how we must respond to each moment in love.

We might think of it as a monastic path, but it is certainly not just for our brothers and sisters in religious orders! The lives they lead are not separate (or even, in reality, different) from our own: their way of life is an intensification of the calling of each and every one of us:

- to live in faith
- to live in love
- to seek God in every aspect of life
- indeed, to seek God in all others

Saint Benedict² taught this way of reading to his followers and it has been esteemed in the centuries which have followed.

In his book *Finding Sanctuary*³, Fr Christopher Jamison, former Abbot of Worth, writes of three key features of *lectio divina*:

- first, 'the text is seen as a **gift to be received**, not a problem to be dissected..... let the text come to you';
- second, 'in order to receive what the text has to offer... read slowly';
- third, remember that this is a way of *prayer*:

'Before reading, pray that God will speak to you through the text... 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'.

¹ Literally, 'divine' or 'holy' reading

² 480-548CE

³ *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life*, Orion Publishing, 2007

Lectio divina is a way of encountering God.

Do not feel daunted! This approach is very natural to us if we just:

- slow down.
- read just a short passage
- read it again a few times, slowly
- allow the text to speak more deeply, not just its surface meaning
- allow the text to speak personally to you
- trust that God is speaking deeply in your heart.

The key - which might seem the most difficult - is to give time and space. You may find it helpful to set aside some time in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed by others.

Lectio divina can also be practised in a group setting: follow the above steps together and try to speak prayerfully what you experience the Word of Scripture saying to you. As a speaker, use few words and don't assume that what you say encompasses all that can be said; as a listener, remain silent and open to hear God's Word in others; do not answer their words, but allow the words of each to remain present to all.

The Examen

The teachings and actions of Jesus recounted in the gospels have always presented Christians with not just instruction, but a **lived example**. Encountering the Word of God in Scripture, we are always - therefore - faced with the moral dimension, the question of *how* we live as Christians: do we fulfil Christ's command to 'love one another as I have loved you'?⁴ The tradition of the Examen, or 'examination of conscience' - reflects our need to question how we live in the light of gospel teaching.

The parables of Jesus put in question our own actions, just as they did the actions of their first hearers.

This is the power of scripture to challenge, as well as to teach the right way.

As Christians, we speak of justice - which means 'right relationships' - with one another and with the world around us, yet we must also seek a right relationship with ourselves and, of course, with God.

What do we mean by right relationships in all these things?

When we move from abstract ideas to the examination of our own thoughts and actions, we begin to face the reality of our lives: we may wish to be good and kind, accepting and loving, but *are we so in reality?*

The Examen - or examination of conscience - is essential to Christian life and yet a practice with which we are unfamiliar. We think of going to Confession, yet seek out the Sacrament less often than we might.

⁴ John 13:34-35

In a world driven by individualism, we try to justify all our actions; we become defensive when challenged by others and we avoid the confrontation of Christ's words and actions, except where they might reassure us.

Such a path leads away from the Gospel.

So to turn back, demands that we examine ourselves 'in thought, word and deed' looking to Scripture as not simply a guide, but as a challenge to our complacency. Every Sunday we say the *Confiteor* and it is worth pausing and reflecting on what we say:

I confess to almighty God
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have greatly sinned,
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,
through my fault, through my fault,
through my most grievous fault;
therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin,
all the Angels and Saints,
and you, my brothers and sisters,
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

All the gospel texts, as inspired Word of God, serve not only to teach but to confront us.

By reflecting on Scripture, in silence and prayer, we nourish our conscience and sharpen it, as we are reminded in Hebrews 4:12:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

We can ask ourselves in prayer:

- do I love others?
- do I accept my life and all it contains as God's gift to me?
- do I care for the world around me? Do I nurture life?
- do I stand for Truth, Justice, Equality, Peace?
- do I give time for God in the day-to-day of my life?

In the light of the gospels, our examination of conscience is always open to new insight and radical change. This is a means to engage with the power of the gospel texts and of the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ.

Imaginative Prayer

This final approach to the gospel texts is best understood as a way to *enter into* the text as living and meaningful.

In it, we simply allow ourselves to enter into the text with our imaginations.

We can do this by:

- imagining a scene from the text - for example, the wedding at Cana; picturing Jesus, his disciples, and Mary, his mother, there. We can imagine ourselves present when Jesus teaches, or when he works a miracle - the reactions of those around him; the joy and the judgment.
- imagining a scene from our own lives - perhaps a painful moment, or a time when we acted wrongly. We can imagine Christ speaking his words directly to us - for example, the Beatitudes⁵ - or remember his response to someone, his compassion, his own tears.

There is no end to the possibilities of imaginative prayer yet, like all these methods, we need to practise them. In our rushed lives we don't make the time to pause in silence to allow these possibilities to arise.

Exercise: Read the following passage slowly and allow yourself to rest on the moment when Jesus looks 'straight' at Peter:

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, 'This man also was with him.' But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!' Then about an hour later yet another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.' But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.⁶

Imagine yourself standing where Peter stands: what do you feel as Jesus looks at you? How do you interpret his gaze? In your imagination, remember a time when you have done wrong: what does Jesus' gaze upon you say to you in your heart?

All scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Catholic Edition.

⁵ Matthew 5:1-12

⁶ Luke 22:54-62