

LENT
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SHARED SWORD

SCRIPTURE REFLECTIONS FOR TODAY'S DISCIPLES

"May I never boast
except in the cross of
our Lord Jesus Christ."
Ephesians 12:14

FOR EVERY DAY FOR SUNDAY FOR INDIVIDUALS FOR GROUPS

SHARE THE WORD

Practical Insights ~ Spirituality



Praying to hear from YOU in Your WORD

by Fr. Bruce Baker, O.Carm.

Think about your own spiritual journey and your vocation—God's special call to you. Is your response to God nourished by Scripture? Most of us would say it is, through our prayerful hearing of God's word during shared worship at Mass and in private prayer. Reread your favorites Scripture passages. Take some time to ask how they help you discover and develop your life of discipleship in Jesus Christ.

Using *lectio divina*, we can dialogue with God in Scripture.

Seeking to talk with God. Retreatants at Mt. Carmel Spiritual Center often ask the Carmelite friars how to make use of Scripture in personal prayer. We teach them a bedrock of Carmelite spirituality—*lectio divina*—literally "divine reading." It is an intentional and open reading of the Bible with the expectation that God will dialogue with us through the Scripture. The Vatican II document on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* (no. 25), reminds us that "prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together...we speak to him when we pray; we hear him when we read the divine sayings."

The four steps. Praying with the Bible is as old as our Christian tradition. The Carmelite mystic John of the Cross (1542-1591) captured the dynamic four-step process of *lectio divina*: "Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation." He was inspired by a twelfth century letter by Guigo, a Carthusian monk, to his friend Gervase. In the popular *The Ladder of Monks*, Guigo described his insight: "One day during manual

work, as I was contemplating the activity of the human spirit, an image came to my mind: I could see the stairway of the four spiritual steps: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation...by which (we) rise from the earth to...the secrets of the sky."

Beginning... We might tend to approach the four steps in an overly structured way. But in *lectio divina*, —a method, not an end in itself—it is not always easy to distinguish when one step ends and the next begins. *Lectio divina* has a natural, gentle flow. As a teenager learning to drive in a car with a stick shift, my first attempts to shift gears were jerky; the car bucked and stalled. But soon my shifting became smooth as silk. Practice and experience lead to success.

Lectio divina's first step is reading. We choose a Scripture passage to pray. In Lent, the daily Mass gospel is a good choice. If you are doing *lectio* in a group—six to eight persons is ideal—make sure all have a Bible or a copy of the passage. Pick four readers. Sit close enough so that everyone can hear easily. Take a deep breath, exhale slowly, close your eyes. Imagine a big parking lot behind your chair. "Park" all your worries and anxiety behind you. Go to a "curious" place in your heart.

What will God say to me today through the sacred Scriptures? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you.

1. Reading (in Latin, *lectio*). How we read is important. The reading must not be approached in a careless way. The first reader reads the passage out loud. (I find it helpful to read aloud even when doing *lectio* by myself.) The reader speaks in normal tones at a thoughtful pace. Pronounce the words carefully. Do not rush. Listeners should be attentive. All should notice where their energy is going!

What words or phrases in the reading *chose* you? I like to read with a pencil and underline words and phrases that attract me. Reading and listening to the word this way prepares us for our dialogue with God. We are gradually closing the gap between the inspired ancient text and the "now" moments of our lives. Those in the group spontaneously share aloud the words or phrases that attract their attention. When sharing, it isn't necessary to go around the circle in order.

2. Meditation (*meditatio*). When everyone has had a chance to share words or phrases, the group leader asks for the second reading. This begins our meditation—which is more than an exercise of deep

continued thought. How each of us meditates depends partly on our personality type. Some are primarily thinkers, others are reflective feelers. Both are rational functions and can help us ruminate, chew, and reflect on the passage.

Some people are mostly sensate and notice details in the passage that others miss. Others are principally intuitive and see connections between the biblical passage and their life experience.

Graciously receive and consider carefully what you discover in your heart, just as Mary pondered Gabriel's message to her (Luke 2:19 and 2:51). We can receive God's communication through words, images, feelings or insights.

Here are some questions that may help you interact with the text after the second reading. • What questions emerge when you hear or read the scripture text? • What details seem odd or unnecessary? • What do you think or feel the scripture text is trying to say? • What memories or images rise up for you? • Does the word challenge you in some way? • Did you feel agitated or soothed when you meditate on the text? • Does the text instill a sense of hope or stir your courage?

After a period of silence, the group leader invites all to share aloud what they've discovered in their hearts during meditation. Sharing is voluntary, but the group facilitator should ensure that everyone who wants to share has time to do so.

The excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ

One of the important successes of renewal in the Church since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) is the way that Catholics have rediscovered the word of God. In the council document on revelation *Dei Verbum* (no. 25), the council fathers encouraged all the Christian faithful to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:8). As an ecclesial or church community, we prize the proclamation of Scriptures in our shared worship services. We also value Scripture in our personal prayer.

3. **Prayer (*oratio*).** After all have had a chance to share, the facilitator asks for the third reading. Again we listen attentively, carefully. Our intentional response to God's word is the third step, and we name that as *prayer*, to which meditation has opened the door. The text has become a mirror in which we see ourselves.

The Carmelite mystic St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) wrote: "Knowing ourselves is something so important...let's strive to make more progress in self-knowledge." When we read and meditate, we discover the truth about ourselves. In prayer we gratefully share with God what we have discovered in our hearts, asking for what we need.

Here are some prompts to help stimulate our response: • Do I see some things differently? • Is God calling me to a special effort or task? • Is God inviting me to change direction in my life? • Is God speaking to my *lectio* group as a community? • Are we being invited to respond in some way together? • What does the living and active Word, Jesus Christ, encourage me to say to God right here and right now?

After a period of silence, the group leader invites everyone to pray

aloud, and allows time for this. Again, sharing is voluntary.

Do you find it difficult to put your yearnings into words and feel tongue-tied, inarticulate, self-conscious? Praying audibly and spontaneously from the heart with others can be difficult. Take courage! You're not alone! St. Paul encourages us: "...the Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness, for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words" (Romans 8:26).

Praying out loud with others in the *lectio* group can be an energizing faith-sharing experience. In a way, we're letting others listen in on our conversation with God. After sharing prayer aloud, participants often report they feel a deeper connection to others in the group and a heightened sense of intimacy with God.

4. **Contemplation (*contemplatio*).** As the fourth step of *lectio divina*, contemplation means a "laying aside of thoughts." We leave our prayer of talking to God and enter into a time of quiet prayer where we simply listen. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:11). The group leader calls for the final reading of

the scripture passage. At its conclusion, we wait on God in silence.

Born in the South where hunting was part of my culture, I see connections between my early duck hunting and *lectio's* fourth step, contemplation. In the duck blind I was quiet and still, consciously deciding to leave my personal concerns back at the camp. I focused instead on the Louisiana marsh and sky as night gave way to dawn, not allowing my mind to slip into daydreaming. I waited, watching for the first ducks on the horizon. Like this, our attitude in contemplation is not relaxation but intense expectation.

Your experience may be in gardening, golf, embroidery, music, or cooking. It can help you see that our focus is being alert to the approach of God's presence and transforming love—however it comes to us.

The first three steps' activity give way to receptivity in this final step. The Catholic mystical tradition calls it the prayer of "loving attention," or "simple gaze." What about distractions? Focusing on and silently repeating a word or a phrase from the reading can help us gently nudge away distracting thoughts.

Culturally formed as "quakers," our temptation is to shorten the time allotted for contemplation. We need to name our resistance to waiting in silence. St. Paul counsels us: "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:25).

Concluding... The leader ends the *lectio divina* session by inviting all to join hands and pray the Lord's Prayer together. Depending on the group size and the length of the selected Scripture, the whole prayerful time will need 45 to 75 minutes. We discover through *lectio divina* that the Bible always gives us more meaning. We can pray the same passage many times, and each time God will provide more light for our daily journey. ☞

Some spiritual writers suggest a fifth step, *incarnatio* or "action"—reminding us that we must embody and actualize the text in our own lives. The true disciple, Jesus said, is the one who "listens to my words and acts on them" (Luke 6:47). As Christ's disciples, we must be both hearers and doers of the word.

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