



THE SCHOOL OF CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Prayerful Reading

Attending with the ear of our heart

The Benedictine monastic tradition offers us a great treasure when it comes to reading. Prayerful reading, known in Latin as *lectio divina*, is the primary monastic way to engage creatively with silence and enter into prayer.

Most of the time we read at great speed. We race from word to word, hardly noticing what we are doing. With prayerful reading, we want to slow down and be aware of what we are doing, so we can decide *how* to engage with the text. When we enter our time of prayerful reading, we want to know we are reading.

Usually, prayerful reading will involve a sacred text. Historically, this would most often be the Bible, but other texts offer us wonderful riches, such as the writings of great saints, wise contemporary teachers, or good poetry.

Whatever the text, we come to it trusting that God will speak to us within the silence of our heart. And we come with a deep quality of attention. We cannot hear God if we are mentally somewhere else, listening to ourselves.

If we want to savour a meal, we need to know we are eating. We bite slowly and deliberately, allowing ourselves to encounter the textures and flavours as fully as we can.

When we begin prayerful reading, we want to know we are reading. We allow ourselves to dwell with each word, to fully encounter it, returning as many times as we need to.

We are seeking wisdom, healing, communion, not information about the world. If the text describes an extraordinary event, we don't ask how or whether it happened, but allow ourselves to hear what God might be saying to us through the words. We approach the text as a gift to be gratefully received, not something to be analysed. We allow the text to approach us.

This is a good way to begin prayerful reading. But it is not where it ends. As someone wisely put it, we might begin with the sense that *we* are reading the text, but gradually we come to realise that the text is reading *us*.

Perhaps one of the most important things to say about the practice of prayerful reading, is that it is a way of listening, of attending with the ear of the heart. Ultimately, like all prayer, it is about relationship, communion.

God is not something to be acquired, but a presence to be responded to. As we learn to listen, to attend with the ear of our heart, we respond to God's presence in our daily life, and supremely in our relationships.

The quiet beholding of God in our hearts always opens into the quiet beholding of his presence in those around us.

PRACTICE

Before Prayerful Reading

First, take a few slow, deep breaths. Following the flow of your breathing, begin to gather your attention in the present moment.

Ask God to help you hear his Word with the ear of your heart.

During Prayerful Reading

Read slowly. Dwell with the words you are reading. Sit with them. Allow them to open and welcome you into their meaning.

Say thank you to God for what you have encountered.

Then simply rest in God's presence, leaving all words behind.

After Prayerful Reading

Try carrying a word or short phrase with you to repeat throughout the day, so that the fruit of your prayerful reading can blossom into prayerful living.

By this simple means, we welcome the Word of God and weave it into the fabric of our life. We discover that prayerful reading is not an activity separate from other activities, but holistic, enriching every aspect of our daily life as our daily life enriches our prayerful reading.

We discover that God, who is beyond all words and metaphors, is guiding us through them to ever deeper relationship, with him, with each other, with all creation.

