

Reading between the lines

An article by Abbot Christopher Jamison OSB published in The Tablet 2 April 2005.

AS YOUR eye travels across this piece of paper, the printed lines, curves and dots communicate instant meaning to your mind. Reading is like breathing: you don't normally notice what you are doing until something goes wrong. So just pause for a moment and notice that you are reading. Weird, isn't it? Now notice that you can make some choices about your reading: you can read quickly or slowly, to extract information from a timetable or to savour the emotion of a love letter. Yet we rarely make conscious choices about our reading: we just go for it, tackling the daily newspaper with vigour or a piece of poetry more thoughtfully.

Most people today are familiar with meditative techniques that can control your breathing in order to increase your wellbeing. From transcendental meditation to blood pressure reduction, gurus and doctors alike recommend breathing control as a good thing. Even popular forms of speech encapsulate it: "just take a deep breath and relax."

There is a rich Catholic tradition that applies similar processes to our reading. In doing so it is very different from the three most pervasive approaches to reading found in contemporary society... First there is reading for distraction - for example magazines and pulp novels. Then there is reading for information - newspapers and DIY books, for instance. Finally there is reading for education - textbooks or Shakespeare for exams. By contrast, the Catholic tradition promotes reading for salvation (in Latin, *lectio divina*).

The last exponent of reading for salvation within the mainstream of culture was Hugh of St Victor, head of the famous School of St Victor in twelfth-century Paris. He opens his discourse on learning (*Didascalion*) with the simple phrase, "Of all things to be sought, the first is wisdom." The wisdom Hugh seeks is Christ himself. In this learning of wisdom, reading is a remedial technique wherein sacred reading and secular reading are one. To read a text of arts or sciences is to be engaged in the work of your salvation.

Hugh is succeeded by those who founded the universities, who read in order to understand and manipulate the world. Information and education replaced salvation as the main purposes of reading. And, in modern times, the faster the better: speed reading is virtuous; slow readers require remedial help.

Yet all is not lost. Just as the monasteries preserved ancient texts from the barbarian hordes during the Dark Ages, so they have preserved the Catholic tradition of sacred reading in modern times. The Second Vatican Council's most neglected Constitution is *Dei Verbum*, on Scripture; without a deep personal re-engagement with Scripture among the People of God, the rest of the Council's agenda limps. Increasing numbers of lay groups and individuals are turning to *lectio* in response to this need.

Lectio has three key features that taken together make it a distinctive approach to reading Scripture. First of all, the text is seen as a gift to be received, not a problem to be dissected. So we read for delight and for wisdom. This is summed up in a memorable phrase by Archbishop Rowan Williams. At the start of his wonderful analysis of Christian spirituality *The Wound of Knowledge*, he speaks about how the events of the Gospel challenge each generation and lead to renewed questioning; but he warns: "The questioning involved here is not our interrogation of the data but the its interrogation of us." The first task to which the tradition invites the modern reader is "let something come to you, avoid imposing yourself." Humility is the key to this wisdom. In his excellent book *Sacred Reading*, the Australian Trappist Fr Michael Casey sums this up well. "Lectio divina is not only a means of discovering something about God; it also helps us to understand our hidden selves."

Second, the lectio tradition teaches us that in order to receive what a text has to offer we must read slowly. This brings to mind the recent "slow food" movement in Italy, where villages guarantee to visitors that there are no "fast food" outlets and that all can enjoy their meals in peace. As an antidote to speed reading we need to foster slow reading. Michael Casey again: "Repetition is the soul of genuine lectio. It is a right-brain activity; we do not grasp the entire content immediately but in a circular manner. We read and advance then we go back and read again. With each repetition, something new may strike us... it takes time for us to become attuned to the subtle rhythms of a particular writing; the more we can slow down our reading, the more likely it is that we will catch sight of something unexpected."

Third, this way of slowly letting the text speak to you is a way of prayer. Before reading, the Christian prays that God will speak to him through this text. When he is reading, he allows this to evolve into meditation and then into prayer. Finally, when the reading is concluded, he keeps some phrase in his heart and repeats it throughout the day. Prayerful reading becomes prayerful living. To summarise: let the text interrogate you; read slowly and let God speak to you; let the reading become prayer and let the prayer suffuse your life. Then reading becomes communion with Christ as much as the Eucharist and begins to transform your life. Reading moves from beyond information to become transformation.

Let me leave the last word to St John Chrysostom (344-407 AD). "I am not' you will say, 'one of the monks, but I have a wife and children, and the care of a household.' This is what has ruined everything, your thinking that the reading of scripture is for monks only, when you need it more than they do. Those who are placed in the world, and who receive wounds every day have the most need of medicine" (Second Homily on Matthew).