

Mind the Gap!

Lectio divina and Contemporary Approaches to Reading

L*ectio divina* is, as it says it is, sacred reading. *Lectio* begins by reading the sacred text and is best drawn to a close returning to read again (to re-read) the sacred text in the light of one's reflection and prayer. Good reading has its roots in the text and remains grounded in the text. *Lectio divina*, by constantly returning to the text, is at the service of keeping the text present to the reader. While the text points beyond itself, since the biblical word is the *sacrament* of the God's word, the word of God cannot be heard until the reader has spent significant time with the biblical words.

Shifting Perceptions in the Last Fifty Years

Fifty years ago, say in the 1960s, biblical criticism was concerned with the author, the author's world and, especially, the author's intention. This can be seen in *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's Constitution on the Divine Revelation:

Since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through humans in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. (§ 12)

Here, the biblical text is perceived as a free-standing entity which possessed a stable meaning that had been intended by the sacred author. In a way, the biblical text is invisible; what is important is happening *behind* the text – in the events and realities that it narrates, in the mind of the author(s), the biblical writer(s) and ultimately, God.

However, in the past 50 years, a renewed sensibility to what texts are and how they communicate with their audiences, began to cause a shift in the value given to the text itself and to what happens in a person who reads or hears a text. 'The reader, once virtually invisible, and the activity of reading, once thought to be an exclusively methodological operation on an inert textual object, had become the primary focus of attention.'¹

These are values that are at the heart of *lectio divina*. In *lectio* one reads a biblical passage. One attends to and savours the words. The words are savoured because the words are important; they are not invisible. In *lectio* it is a *person* who reads and responds to the words of the sacred text. What is happening to that person—what the person feels, comes to see, begins to realise, their response—lies at the heart of *lectio*. Everyone who has an experience of *lectio divina* will recognise the validity of Michael Casey's insight that *lectio divina*

is not the alienating absorption of a message that is foreign or even hostile to our deepest aspirations; it is the surprising conclusion that our most authentic level of being is mirrored in the Scriptures. What is most intimate to our existence as persons is nourished and nurtured by God's word.²

In *lectio divina* the reader is not invisible. The reader of the word is a person who is valued. In the Holy Spirit, this person is nourished and nurtured by the word.

Minding the Gap: Reading Today Contemporary approaches to reading emphasise that all texts (and that includes films, paintings, photographs, sculptures) have an effect on their audience. The foundational insight of contemporary literary theory, that 'the literary text does something to its reader,' brings both reader and text to the fore.³

There are two dimensions of how literary texts function – the human fashion of how texts communicate (see *DV* § 12) – that permit a deeper appreciation of *lectio divina*: (a) texts communicate because they create gaps, spaces for the reader to fill, (b) texts communicate because they surprise the reader; they say things are *not* like this, but like *this*. The reader who fails to be surprised, not only hears nothing new, but really hears nothing at all! The reader who fails to appreciate the gaps shuts down the revelatory potential of the text.

Gaps (also termed blanks or discontinuities) have to be negotiated in the act of reading. 'Whenever the

reader bridges a gap, communication begins.'⁴ Part of the art of reading well is discovering how to mind the gap and how to bridge it well. Bridging the gap means making connections between the different dimensions of the text. It means learning how to supply what is not there. The reader makes links between the different parts of the text and their own experience. In this way the reader enters into the world created by the text and can be transformed by the text.

Surprises (also termed negations) permit 'readers to perceive what they normally cannot see in the ordinary process of day-to-day living.'⁵ The parables, with their layers of surprises (e.g., the elder son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son who remains outside), are the location *par excellence* of biblical surprise. Once we see what we have not seen before, we are changed and are capable of receiving new life.

A Living Word for a Living Reader

In the discipline of *lectio divina*, the reader attends to the words of the biblical text. The attending keeps the text before the reader in such a way that the gaps can be seen and the surprises can be recognised. The word *becomes* 'living and active' (Heb 4:12). The living reader permits the living word to deliver its life.

NOTES

¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, 'The Gospels and the Reader' in Stephen C. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 97–118; here 99.

² Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading. The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Ligouri: Triumph Books), 30.

³ This leads us again to the heart of *lectio divina*: we read the sacred text so that it may do something for us. A key aspect of the discipline of *lectio* is that it keeps the reader before the text and the text before the reader. Wolfgang Iser, a major reading theorist, provides a worthwhile introduction to the processes of reading in his *How to Do Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 57–69.

⁴ Iser, *How to Do Theory*, 64.

⁵ Iser, *How to Do Theory*, 63.