

AN INVITATION TO LECTIO DIVINA

The Gospel is a Word that is addressed to us. When we welcome it, when we believe in it, when we let it reach into our very selves, it unleashes within us a new creation, an inner Big Bang greater than the birth of the material world.

That is what happens when we dedicate ourselves to Lectio Divina, as we are going to do now. The Gospels tell us what happen when people listen to the Good News of the Kingdom.

There was a bleeding woman who had been ill for 12 years. She had wasted all her money in medicines and doctors to no good but rather for the worse. She heard about Jesus and thought for herself: "If only I could touch the fringe of his cloak..." And she did, and she was healed there and then. A blind man who heard that the tumult he felt coming was all about Jesus, began to cry out to him at the top of his voice... and he recovered his sight.

Once, when I was teaching, we read the passage where Jesus walks on water and Peter with him. I asked the students if they thought that Jesus had really walked on water. Most of them, cradle Catholics, said they did. But one girl said she didn't. She had serious learning disabilities. "Why?" I asked her. "Because people do not walk on water, that is impossible" she answered. I was struck because her answer made me realize that she was reading what the Gospel what literally saying, her learning disability was helping her to read well. The rest of us were passing over the awe we should experience at the wonders and miracles of the Gospels and, taking them for granted, going straight into the teaching implied in them. I think this is a mistake. We have not yet believed in the Gospel if we have not yet been overcome by awe at what it is telling us. Because, if Jesus can walk on water, then this world is a very different place. If Lazarus truly rose from the tomb after 4 days, then this life is a very different thing. If Jesus Christ is actually Risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father, then we are instantly carried into a new understanding of reality.

Jesus Christ is Risen. He rose from the dead on the third day and never died again. He is not dead. The power and the light shining from his resurrection have not faded a single bit. He is alive here with us and he is ready to work in us greater wonders than the ones the Gospels tell us. He is now and always the Lord and Master of the sea and the wind and of all creation. Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Friend, is the Son of God, and the sea and the earth and the stars and everything we see is still and always ready to joyfully obey their Master.

How do we listen to the Gospel? Of course, there is teaching in the Gospel. But what is there in the first place is not moral teaching, things that we have to do. What is there in the first place is a proclamation of the Kingdom of God, of the Power of God. He has come to save us, to heal us, to forgive us, to restore us to his friendship, to walk with us, to rescue us from slavery and idolatry and to give us eternal life here and now. The miracles in the Gospel proclaim that God has not forsaken us, that He is in charge, that his Kingdom is close at hand.

A transformation, a revolutionary transformation, happens within us when we hear this Good News and let it reach our hearts. This brings about a conversion that is not the result of human efforts but an experience that leads into a new understanding of reality. It is truly like the waking up of someone who was asleep.

*Wake up from your sleep,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Ephesians 5: 14)*

This is what St Benedict tell us in the Prologue when he says, "The time has come for us to rouse ourselves from sleep. Let us open our eyes to the light that can change us into the likeness of God. Let our ears be alert to the stirring call of his voice crying to us every day: Today, if you should hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (RB P, 8- 10).

Let us listen, then, to his voice and wake up from the dream of living as if we were alone in this world. It is not true, it is a lie that we are abandoned to our lot, forsaken, unknown, like a speck of dust floating randomly in outer space. Why do you want to swallow a lie? The Gospel is proclaiming to us in all sorts of ways, in words and in facts, that the Kingdom of God is near. In the Gospels we see Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Master, racking his brains inventing parables and searching for metaphors, trying his best to convey to us what the Kingdom means: a sower, a mustard seed, a merchant of fine pearls, a hidden treasure, a prodigal son, a lost sheep, a net, a banquet, a wedding. No image seems to be enough for him in his eagerness to convince us that God is really in charge, that you can trust Him and call him Abba, Father. All his teaching and his miracles are about this truth. The definitive, ultimate proclamation of this truth, aiming at definitively doing away with any trace of doubt within us, is his Paschal Mystery, the Mystery of his Passion, his Death and his Resurrection,

For this is how God loved the world:
he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish
but may have eternal life. (Jn 3, 16)

Even if you are a terrible sinner, you are invited to believe in the love of God for you. In the Gospel it is not the virtue of man that wins the favour of God. It is the love of God that calls forth from within the very best of every man and woman, his or her true self. That is why tax collectors and sinners flocked to Jesus, while scribes and Pharisees remained aloof. Tax collectors and sinners bend the ear of their hearts to listen. Scribes and Pharisees heard but did not listened, they went only half way, responding to the message not with faith but with an opinion.

Our uprightness, says the Lord in the Gospel, should surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees. But it is impossible to surpass scribes and Pharisees in uprightness! They are completely determined, committed, laborious, dedicated wholeheartedly to uprightness! How are we, weak and lukewarm as we are, to surpass them? Not only do not kill, but do not even get cross with your brother. Not only do not commit adultery, but do not even look with lust. Not only do not swear, but only yes for yes and no for no. Not only do not take eye for eye or tooth for tooth but turn the other cheek and walk the extra mile. Not only do not hate your enemy but love him and pray for him. The commandments now need to reach our innermost intentions and feelings, until we are perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. How can this be possible? If the scribes and the Pharisees have gone as far as it is humanly possible on the way of virtue, then there must be another way for us Christians if we are to surpass them.

We can have a glimpse of this alternative route, this other way, in the example of people like the first disciples. We are rightly astonished when we read that they at once left their boats, nets and families, to follow the Lord. They seem to do so without struggle, as if they were doing the obvious thing. It is not human effort what is driving them, it is not generosity as the scribes and the Pharisees understand it. Rather, it seems to me, that they have seen something, heard or experienced something, that has turned their world upside down. They had heard the proclamation of the Good News and had believed in it: The Kingdom of God is close at hand! No need to worry anymore. Fish flocked to their nets at his command! If this Master is calling, why should we be afraid of not having enough to eat, or to drink or to wear? What

else can we do but follow him? To follow him is a joy and a privilege, it is a fascinating adventure, and thus the uprightness of scribes and Pharisees is long surpassed by these unlearned men. They seem to be out of their minds. It must have caused great concern to their families and friends.

Another good example is Zacchaeus, the little rich man, chief tax collector. Before he met the Lord, it must have taken painful effort to get one penny out of him. And there we see him, all of a sudden, giving away half of everything he has, full of joy, as if he was striking the best deal ever. Zacchaeus heard a word that turned his world upside down. So far, he had put all his intelligence and work and eagerness into money, but now money is not important to him anymore. And the uprightness of scribes and Pharisees is surpassed again, this time by the little rich man they despise as a sinner. Again, if he had a wife, she probably wanted to take him to the psychiatrist.

The Lord himself is this other way. His word, pronounced intimately in the inner chamber of our hearts, is the way. His word is more powerful than any human determination, more effective than any human labour, more convincing than any human argumentation. The word of the Lord, resounding in the human heart, operates a revolution that can take us beyond the uprightness of scribes and Pharisees. That is the word that transformed the first disciples and Zacchaeus. That is the word that Benedict heard in his cave. That is the word that all saints have heard and that has taken them to holiness. That is the same word that is addressed to us here today.

It is the love of God that calls forth from within each one of us the image of Jesus Christ, his Beloved Son.

Love consists in this:

it is not we who loved God,
but God loved us and sent his Son to expiate our sins.

My dear friends,
if God loved us so much,
we too should love one another. (1Jn 4, 10- 11)

I would like to invite you all, this morning, to come into the presence of the Lord. When Moses approached the burning bush, he was told to take off his sandals, because he was treading on holy ground (cf Ex 3, 5). This was written for us today. Let us too take off the sandals of our busyness and our virtue and our cleverness. Let us enter barefooted, assisted by our disabilities, being radically honest about ourselves, into a conversation with Our Lord and Master in our Lectio Divina. Let us bow down before him, overcome with awe at the presence of the Lord among us. Let us intently bend the ear of our hearts to the Word that the Risen Christ is longing to pronounce within it.

The reading we have chosen (Mk 10, 17- 27) came to us some weeks ago on Sunday Mass. It is a fantastic reading. It has a particularly glorious and fertile history. Hearing this reading is at the root of the conversion of St Anthony of Egypt, father of Christian monasticism. It was picked up at random by St Francis and his first companions at the beginning of their adventure, when they didn't know what to do next. We chose it because the more we read it, the more it seemed to contain what we wanted to be the theme of our retreat.

We want to invite you to really dive into it. Read so intently that you get under the skin of the people talking with the Lord, until you can experience what they experienced. Do not miss any detail, everything is precious. Do not take things for granted, read the Gospel as it was your very first time. Ask yourself questions, How can someone say what Jesus says? You will be confronted by the need to make a decision: he is either a lunatic or he is the Son of God. Do not read moralistically. Do not think first of what

you have to do, but what the Lord is doing for you. The Gospel is Good News. If it becomes Bad News, it's a signal that you are not reading well.

Lectio Divina is not a complicated exercise, it is simple. Its difficulty lies precisely in its simplicity and, I would add, in the need to persevere in it day after day. Doing Lectio Divina is like making a fire: you mustn't start with big logs. You need kindling to get it going. Kindling, in our case, is the simple things that you can do: reading attentively, re-reading, copying -lovingly and carefully as you did in your new notebook on the first day of the school year- learning by heart, rewriting in your own words, making sure you understand to your best ability, taking care not to miss any detail, like someone who reads a letter from the Beloved and has all senses alert to the slightest detail, turning of the phrase or resonances of the words the Beloved chose. Lectio Divina is a work, but a work of love. It is reading with your heart. Do not worry about whether it is working or not, because it is! Is there anyone among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when he asked for fish? (Mt 7, 10). Let the Lord be the Lord in your Lectio, and do not judge it by your limited human standards.

Do what you can do and leave the rest to him.

When wine was lacking in the wedding at Cana the Lord asked the servants to fill six jars with water, big jars, somewhere around five hundred liters of water in total. They shouldn't have done so! What was the point of filling jars with water when it was wine they were lacking? But they did. (Jn 2) When bread was lacking in the wilderness a little boy offered five loaves of bread and two fish. But what is that for so many? asked Andrew. And it was enough. (cf Jn 6). Peter had been out all night long, working hard and catching nothing. But he did cast out his nets when the Lord told him to do so (cf Lk 5).

Let us be like them, let us light our fire with kindling we have at hand. Fill up the jars copying, offer your five loaves scrutinizing, cast out your nets starting all over again when you seem to hit a dead end, even if you think time is almost up. Let us sow our mustard seed, let us put a little yeast in our dough.

And let the Lord, Creator of Heaven and Earth, take care of the rest.

The Weave of Manquehue Prayer
General Retreat 2018, Ampleforth