

20th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (August 14, 2022)

Last week we considered the importance of having a personal relationship with Jesus—not only knowing about him, but knowing him as both the Savior and the loving Good Shepherd and dearest friend that he really is for each of us. I also talked briefly about prayer as a powerful and necessary way to build and strengthen that relationship.

Today I want to consider for a few moments a particular kind of prayer that goes by the Latin name *lectio divina*—prayerfully reading and reflecting on sacred scripture. It involves our reading but also our listening; not only ‘what are these words on this page?’, but also ‘what is God trying to tell me through these words on this page?’ By the way, it’s always a good idea to offer a brief prayer to the Holy Spirit for his guidance before beginning this kind of sacred reading.

Lectio divina consists of four main steps:

1. **reading**—choose a short passage, a few verses or maybe even just a verse or two from the Bible. A good place to start, especially if this is new for you, is with one of the four gospels or one of St. Paul’s letters. Choose a verse or a passage, and read it slowly and attentively—don’t race through it, but let it soak in. Read it aloud if possible, and read it a few times—not just once—and do so slowly and reflectively each time. Sometimes it happens that a specific word or phrase will jump out at you; if that’s the case, don’t be afraid to let yourself linger on that word or phrase.
2. **meditation/reflection**—after letting that word soak in a bit, think about it: how do you react to what you have just read? For example, if it is a gospel story about something Jesus taught or did, imagine yourself there as part of the crowd. You are watching him; you are listening to him. Are you surprised by what you see and hear? Are you gladdened? Confused? Comforted? Frightened? Maybe even annoyed or angered? Be aware of how you respond to this word.
3. **prayer**—after this deliberate, non-rushed reading and reflection, tell God what’s on your mind and heart. Remember: prayer is not only saying the prayers we learned as kids; it’s also speaking to God as if he’s your closest and dearest friend right by your side...which, by the way, he is! Be honest with God—let him know what you are really thinking, wondering, and feeling. Of course God already knows all that before we speak it to him, but it’s really important for us to say it ourselves, to own it and to do so honestly.
4. **contemplation**—a quiet openness or receptivity to what God is saying to you; his response to your prayer. You may experience a strong, obvious or immediate sense of God’s response...or you may not. If you do not, it certainly doesn’t mean that you have somehow ‘failed’ at this kind of prayer. Simply allow God to speak to you and lead you in his good time and according to his will for you.

With this in mind, let’s take a brief look at today’s gospel. This is certainly a challenging passage, to say the least, with Jesus talking about setting the earth on fire and coming to establish

division...even between parents and children and in-laws against each other. How might we approach this passage using *lectio divina*?

1. reading—again, simply read this passage two or three or so times and do so slowly. Let the words soak in before you do anything else.
2. reflection—think about what Jesus is saying and ask yourself: what does he mean? You know from the rest of the gospels that Jesus is all about love and mercy and the joy of being in communion with those we love. And we also know that Jesus calls all of us to ongoing conversion and continued growth in holiness. So how do I make sense of this passage which seems to contradict what I know of Jesus from the rest of the gospels?
3. prayer—I can easily imagine our prayer sounding something like this: “Lord, what are you talking about?? Do you really desire this kind of division within families? My own family is divided on so many things. Some of my children no longer take part in Mass or practice their Catholic faith; others haven’t spoken to each other for years because of something said or done a long time ago. Lord, please bring an end to this bitterness and these divisions—they are driving me crazy!” That’s what I mean by honest prayer, baring your heart and soul to the Lord who so very much wants you to turn to him in your need.
4. contemplation—sitting with that scripture passage, remind yourself of God and his constant presence and merciful love, being open and responsive to what he may be calling you to do or what he wants of you...or maybe what he does not want of you.

Again: in and through prayer we grow in our relationship, our one-on-one connection with Jesus. With this particular kind of Bible-based reading, reflection and prayer, we allow him to draw us closer to himself and to be challenged, strengthened and comforted by his word. We not only come to know more about Jesus; we also come to know him more deeply, genuinely and personally. And that is exactly what he wants because of his own unbounded and unconditional love for each one of us.