

Praying the Text

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One afternoon two years ago I found myself browsing the shelves in the presbytery resource room. I had been experimenting in a haphazard way with meditative prayer. Having recently reread Roberta Bondi's *To Pray and To Love*, I had been struck by what she calls "kitchen table prayer," a form of silent prayer in which one sits in the presence of God with no purpose other than to be in the intimate presence of a beloved and loving friend.¹ As a pastor with no particularly disciplined prayer life, and with too many things to do each week that required concrete results, I found this kind of prayer deeply appealing. I had made a little progress when I found myself in the resource room staring at the shelf marked "spirituality."

In front of me were several books with the words *lectio divina*, or "divine reading," in the title. After leafing through them I checked out two, one of which was exclusively devoted to divine reading while the other gave it a chapter. Similar to Bondi's kitchen table prayer, I found that divine reading is an ancient form of prayer in which the scriptures are "prayed" instead of read for insight or understanding. The practitioner chooses a short piece of scripture—the psalms are an especially frequent choice—and concentrates on a few lines or even a single verse or phrase, repeating the words aloud or silently. Questions which pop into the mind are pushed aside. There is no puzzling over the meaning of the text in the past or the present. The text is being used not as a source of understanding or even inspiration, but simply as an avenue for entering the presence of God. Both books mentioned that some practitioners of *lectio divina* write in a journal after praying, noting new thoughts or feelings experienced during their time of prayer, or simply writing in a stream of consciousness mode, again without attempting to edit or structure the result.

A few days later I shared what I had read with a minister friend. He was very intrigued by *lectio divina* and did more research into it on his own. He soon proposed that we form a small prayer group to gather once a week and pray the lectionary texts. The decision to use the lectionary was almost perfunctory. Pastors from several denominations (Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian) were being invited to join the group; most of us were preachers. The texts from the Common Lectionary were something we shared. For my part there was also the unspoken feeling that if we were praying the lectionary texts I could justify the extravagance of taking ninety minutes each week for the group. If the spiritual payoff was a bust, at least a little time had gone into sermon preparation.

I had already learned from my solitary attempts at praying the scriptures that divine reading was simple to describe, but not simple to do. A well-trained reader, especially one who loves the nuances and subtle shadings of a text, enjoys all the concomitant intellectual processes of studying scripture—but prayer is not study. In my case I found it important to assign conventional study of the text to the following day. This helped me "turn off" exegetical skills and training long enough to meditate and pray.

Equally off-putting at first was the sense that nothing productive or valuable was happening. The suggested length of time for divine reading was relatively brief—and

accomplishable—at ten to twenty minutes. Although some practitioners of *lectio divina* may routinely enter a deep meditative state in that period, most do not. As the words of a striking verse or phrase are repeated in the mind, questions continue to arise and must be pushed aside. Sounds from the building and surrounding neighborhood intrude. Memories of appointments and obligations float to the surface. All must be ignored in what often feels more like struggle than meditation. Again, it was the promise of additional insight into the lectionary texts that helped me persist.

The group began with six participants and while the personnel has changed over time, the total number has remained a stable five or six. Two or three people can pray the texts with equal effectiveness. We gather each Tuesday in a comfortable church parlor with a coffeepot and a box of tissues. We have one leader, our founder, who announces the texts based on the *Common Lectionary*. Anyone is free to pray a different text if the *Common Lectionary* deviates from his or her denominational choices for the week. The leader then reads all or a portion of the psalm for the week as an opening prayer. While group leadership could be rotated, I find that having one “voice” praying aloud the weekly psalm has been powerful and provided meaningful continuity.

At the end of the psalm/prayer we all flip through our Bibles, each reading all four texts. In the first few minutes there is a lot of page turning as people read and reread the texts in a conventional manner, each one choosing which text to pray. After a few minutes of this the leader turns on a tape of mediative music, usually chants, or instrumental music. Accustomed to doing my divine reading in silence, I found any music bothersome at first, but have since grown to like it. We contemplate the texts for twenty to thirty minutes. Most of us read meditatively for ten to fifteen minutes and then write in a notebook for another ten to fifteen. Those who finish first refill their coffee cups, grab a tissue, or read through what they have written, making a change or addition here or there.

When all of us are finished we take turns reading what we have written that day. Anyone begins, depending on how excited, or perplexed, or moved he or she may feel. Reading aloud is never required, but I have found that newcomers to the group discover quickly what I discovered myself: everyone wants to share once they are assured that there is no expectation that this writing be “productive” or “impressive.” Because it is a response to prayer, the writing is profoundly personal, something written in the presence of God. As such it is beyond critique. No one is present to influence another person’s level of insight. All of us are there to pray in a safe and supportive setting, to make discoveries in our own writing, to deepen our engagement with the lectionary texts, and to experience the presence of the Spirit that is inherent in the reading of scripture. We do ask one another questions about our writing, and the conversations often become wide-ranging explorations of potential meanings of the texts. Nonetheless, the insight is *secondary* to the act of shared prayer and sense of shared ministry.

This noncritical atmosphere is probably crucial to shared *lectio divina*. A competitive group member out to impress his or her peers would probably find the intensely personal process too vulnerable, and drop out. For it is an intensely personal experience. By the third or fourth session all of us realized that what we were writing in response to that week’s scriptures was the stuff of our lives. We agreed to keep our writing confidential in order to ensure that each of us felt free to write whatever came to mind. After the first months it became commonplace each week for at least one

group member to be moved to tears while writing or reading aloud. Most often these tears are not expressions of sadness, but of gratitude for intimacy with God. Again, because we are a prayer group and not a support group or therapy session, we have been able to accept each other's emotions simply, with great respect for the power of scripture to speak to our inmost lives.

Taking part in a lectionary prayer group has affected my preaching in several ways. The most profound has been a sense of intense reconnection with very familiar texts. A story will illustrate. I went to the prayer group the week before Palm Sunday feeling bored and dispirited with the thought of writing another sermon on Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem—and feeling guilty for feeling that way. We began the time of prayer with the psalm for the day, a psalm of jubilation at the entry of a king:

O give thanks to the Lord for [God] is good;
[God's] steadfast love endures forever...
Save us (Hosanna), we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! (Ps. 118: 1; 25, NRSV)

I felt a tension between these lines, and thought of a pathetic crowd beseeching Jesus, unaware of who he was. I then had the uncomfortable realization that I, too, in my boredom and restlessness, was unaware of his identity.

While praying the gospel text, Matthew 21:1-11, my mind centered on the phrases "their cloaks on the road" and "cut branches," which I repeated mentally again and again. (The phrases that leap out and become the center of prayer are seldom what one expects.) I remembered the astonishing sight from my television screen of Haitians welcoming the return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, an emaciated crowd wearing rags and waving branches, the only festal banner such desperately poor people had at hand. With this memory I had a new and visceral understanding of what it meant for the crowd to place palm branches in Jesus' path. Then I wondered what was *my* cloak? Would I have placed it in the road?

I felt swept up, as if standing in a crowd, a crowd I realized in a fresh way was probably as meager and impoverished, as desperate for a savior as the Haitians had been. Suddenly I saw myself, not as I am now, but as I was in college, with thick long black hair reaching to the small of my back. Without warning I lay down in the road, my hair a cloak I longed to offer.

The profound intimacy, even eroticism, of my vision of myself on the road did not, of course, appear in my sermon that week. What did inform my preaching was renewed passion for this familiar story, and an enhanced freedom to experiment with images of the crowd and the congregation's place in it.

A second benefit of preaching the lectionary texts is the value of encountering the text in the same context the congregation does each week—worship. In prayer, the text leads me, and I follow it as would a person sitting in the pews. I don't determine, as I do in study, where in the text I will spend time, or where I will go next. I am being led by an interpreter other than myself, and while I often puzzle at what I hear, the knowledge that I am at worship is liberating, and at times astonishing. It fills me for the task of interpretation.

The following entry from my prayer journal will perhaps illustrate the fluid way in which praying the text can lead from reflection on the text itself, to awareness of

events in one's own life and ministry, to unexpected doxology. The week was Lent 3, 1996, when the hopes for peace in the Middle East were beginning to crumble. I chose to pray Exod. 17:1-7:

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel....

A contentious people. The Israelites were frightened—Did you bring us here to die? It seems the same fear is present again, as the peace process methodically falls apart—or, more properly, is killed. My sympathies are with the Israelites. I could never bear to see my children thirst, to fear letting them ride on a bus—even for the reward of "faith" or "peace." I also have sympathy for Moses—"They are going to stone me" and God promises to go before him, to be his rock, to work it all out. God even gives the good advice that Moses shouldn't try to handle everything alone, but gather up a bunch of people to come along as witnesses.

In my congregation I am presently ticked off at a particularly contentious woman, who sees conspiracy everywhere—plots to leave her out of loops that aren't even there. She neuroses, and calls other people and leads them to neurose about nonexistent things. I want to brain her with a rock. I won't, of course. I will give her water. But only because God has promised to go before me and provide it.

How I love the intimacy of the talk between Moses and God—as if they were friends, planning how to carry this next bit of desert ministry off. I want it all this morning—a God who never leads me into a desert, abundant water within sight, the promise that my faithfulness will never harm my children, and the right to be contentious when things don't work out. I want to throw things at people who annoy me and buttonhole God for a private chat in which all my needs are met—O Lord, let me follow after you without having to carry my own water, or fill my pockets with rocks. Let me bring people with me so we can all witness to each other and take turns getting wet. Amen.

This is a more cogent entry than most, but a good illustration of the unexpected shifts between the text and one's present situation, suddenly resolving (or at least ceasing for a time) in worship that lifts and sustains. It was written in the prayer group and shared with the other writings from that day.

A final and somewhat paradoxical benefit of praying the texts is enhanced

playfulness. There is something daunting about study no matter how gratifying, especially since one's study must result in powerful interpretation once a week, ready or not. Oddly, praying the text allows both power and playfulness, much as in any intensely intimate relationship. Intimacy at its best can be the source of one's deepest sense of meaning and one's most free and silly moments. To be able to respond in prayer to scripture without fear of censure is to go where the text touches deeply.

Whether or not insights gained from praying the text are used in the sermon itself is always the preacher's decision week to week. But week to week, praying the text does affect the one doing the preaching, offering renewed passion for preaching, worship, insight into life and ministry, playful freedom in working with the text, and an ever-present avenue to the humbling, sustaining, life-giving Word.

Notes

¹Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and To Love, Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 69.