

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
TIME TO PRAY
WK 3: PAYING WITH SCRIPTURE –LECTIO DIVINA

Today is the third in a series that we are doing this autumn on prayer. So once again, I will not be preaching on the lectionary. For that, you will have to come to the mid week services.

I feel a slight twinge of guilt discarding the lectionary like this – and I promise that we'll return to it unswervingly in November – but for now, our departure from the usual pattern is a statement of how important Gregor and I think it is that we take time together as a congregation to think about prayer, to commit ourselves to it, and to find methods that work for us.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say **there is nothing more important for our growth in faith – our growth as human beings – than to find a way of praying that opens us to God's presence, and grounds us in the reality of God's love for us.** This is where Christian life begins – with the absolute conviction that God loves us. With our desire to love God. And out of that flows all the rest – our love for each other, and our care for the church and the world; our ability to face the truth about ourselves and to laugh at ourselves, our capacity to bear with suffering and distress, and to share with others in both sorrow and joy. All of it comes from the knowledge that we are loved – that we have value – that our whole life is grounded in God, in the one who gives us life.

But although faith starts and ends with God's love, it can be incredibly hard to actually believe in it. It can be hard for all sorts of reasons. For some of us, we have no framework for understanding love. Perhaps our parents couldn't show love, or

weren't much around, or betrayed trust. Perhaps there have been others who we thought loved us, who failed us in dramatic ways. For others of us, it may be that we don't think we're worth loving – we are so aware of our own faults, our own hidden nastiness, that it seems impossible that God could love us as we are. Maybe if we were better, maybe once we learn to be perfect – but for now, God's love seems a remote promise. Something meant for other (better) people.

If none of this feels familiar – if you are quite at ease with the fact of God's love – count your blessings. For you, prayer will not be a time of learning the depth of God's love so much as a time of savouring it. The rest of us hope to join you in that soon...

Now, I could preach for weeks about God's love. I could encourage you to read the bible and books of theology. I could ask you to listen to the story of other people who have come to trust absolutely in the depth of God's love for them. But, none of it would matter unless and until you had some sort of direct experience of that love. Something definite. Incontrovertible. Even if it was only a fleeting second of knowing that you are loved, knowing that God is real.

And that is why prayer is so important.

Prayer is a space in which we open ourselves to the possibility of God's presence. It is a space where we offer up all our longings and desires and uncertainties, and invite God to reach through them. It is – as Gregor said – a way of exploring our relationship with God.

In most of our relationships, trust and love take time – we get to know the other person, and we learn whether they are reliable. Whether they are trustworthy. And only then do we begin to risk love.

And it is the same with God. No matter how much we know that we are supposed to trust God, the business of trusting takes time. Love grows. We need to test and explore the relationship.

And that is where this week's method of prayer comes in. Praying with Scripture – the ancient pattern of *Lectio Divina*, or holy reading—in which we let the words of God sink deep inside us, so that they re-shape our reality and help us to grow in our Love for God.

Lectio begins with the premise that God can use scripture to speak to us now. That's what it means to say that Scripture is inspired – that God uses these words and these stories to communicate with us, to give us himself. So when we pray with scripture, we come with expectation of hearing God. We expect God to be present in these words.

If you've ever had the experience of something 'coming to life' in a bible reading, or of hearing exactly what you needed in a hymn or a sermon, then you will know what I'm talking about. Suddenly, the words in front of you – the words that have always been there and that are the same for everyone – seem like they are just for you. God speaks to us now, and his Word for us becomes real.

And when the Word of God becomes real for us, so does God's love. We start to hear the affirmations of scripture as God's word for us: 'do not be afraid', 'you are my beloved Son', 'you are precious in my sight and I love you.' And then, as we learn to trust in God's love, we can also respond to God's challenge: 'forgive as you have been forgiven,' 'love one another', 'take up your cross and follow me'.

As we learn to pray with scripture, the words and images of the bible sink deep inside us. They become a part of our consciousness and a means of our dialogue with God.

So how do we do it?

If you turn to this week's card, I'm going to talk you through the way of praying it sets out.

I hope that you will try this at some point this week. And at the end, I'm going to ask you to think about what is possible for you – and to make a real commitment to give some time to God this week in prayer.

[go to prayer card]

TIME TO PRAY
WEEK 3: PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE –
LECTIO DIVINA

Praying with scripture is a very different thing from studying the bible. When we pray with scripture, we do not need to try to understand the historical context or cross reference the passage before us with other passages or bits of the creed. We simply trust that scripture can be God’s word for us now – that God meets us in scripture, and uses these words, images and stories to pull us more deeply into relationship with him.

We will try several different ways of praying with scripture over the next few weeks. This week, we begin with *lectio divina* (‘holy reading’). *Lectio* is a very old and well-proven method of praying with scripture. And for most of us, it is a form of prayer that we will return to time and again as we seek to be present to God and open ourselves to his Word

Lectio Divina

Before hand –

Plan ahead so that you can have a quiet time for prayer. Turn off the phone, send the children out to play, take advantage of the church being open – do whatever you can to set aside time for God that won’t be interrupted. Choose a specific amount of time and stick to it – even if nothing seems to be ‘happening’. It’s quite common to ‘waste’ 29 minutes, for the sake of 1 minute of meaningful prayer.

Time to pray –

1. Sit down comfortably in a position you can sustain for the whole time of your prayer. Let yourself become still. Become aware of your breathing, of the weight of your hands resting in your lap, the tension in your neck and shoulders falling away. Offer this time to God, and ask God to give you what you need in this time of prayer.

2. Begin to read through the text (the one given, or some other text you have chosen before hand). Read very slowly, letting each word sink in. Be open to the words, and to God's presence in them.

3. As you read, watch for a word or phrase that strikes you. something that 'lights up' or 'strikes a chord'. As soon as this happens, stop reading.

Rest with that phrase, and repeat it gently. Let it sink deep within you without trying to understand or make sense. Just hold on to the phrase and let it echo inside you.

4. In time, you will become aware of the impression the words are having on you. You might feel reassurance or love. But you might also feel annoyance, frustration or anger. Whatever your response, let that become the focus of your prayer. 'Talk' with God about it, or simply remain in silence, aware of what God has stirred inside you.

5. After a while, the focus of your prayer will naturally fade away. Bring this time of prayer to a close by offering God thanks, or admitting sorrow, or by saying the Lord's Prayer. However you choose to end your time of prayer, it is important to consciously bring the time of prayer to a close.

6. If you find that nothing much is happening, or that you move quite quickly through the process, don't worry. Just read through the passage again, and sit quietly with God for the time you have set aside.

Isaiah 43.1-7 (adapted)

Thus says the Lord who created you
he who formed you
have no fear for I have redeemed you
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters I will be with you.
And through deep rivers, they will not overwhelm.
When you walk through the fire you will not be burnt,
the flames will not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
You are precious in my sight
I honour you and love you.
Have no fear, for I am with you.

Other suggested texts:

Jer 29.11-14	2 Cor 11.16-12.10
Ps. 139	John 21
Isa 30.15, 18-21	Lk 1.26-38
Isa 55.6-11	I Kgs 19/8-13
Lamentations 3.21-29	