

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said;

but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Luke 24:13-35





# Prologue

## **Prayerful reading**

Of all the mysteries in the world, possibly the greatest (to me, at least) is what happens under a car's bonnet. In fact, if I am being honest, most parts of my car are a mystery to me, which is why I stick to driving and leave the technicalities to others, notably garage mechanics and my wife.

There are times, however, when the keepers of the mysteries cannot be summoned. On Christmas Day last year, for example, when I drove my car over the metal dragon's teeth that had been placed at the entrance of a local car park to encourage traffic to flow in an orderly direction. Sadly, the car park's owners hadn't counted on drivers like me. Trying to reverse out of my parking bay, I burst a tyre and was stranded. With my own lack of technical competence cruelly revealed, there was only one option open to me, a desperate measure in a desperate situation: I turned to the car's instruction manual and thought about changing the wheel myself.

We sometimes treat the Bible like a car's instruction manual. It sits in the domestic equivalent of the glove compartment and is pulled out only at times of great need, a last resort

when something breaks down in our lives. It's no surprise that we struggle to find our way around it. Colossians, is that somewhere near Philipians? (Is "How to Change a Tyre" near "How to Check the Oil"?) Ecclesiastes, is that the same as Ecclesiasticus? (The carburettor, is that the same as the catalytic convertor?) And, when we find the right page, we look for clear, utterly unambiguous instructions. Should I send my child to the local Catholic school or not? (Is the knob that unlocks the bonnet under the passenger seat or by the driver's door?) Unless we are told exactly what to do, we throw up our hands and retreat into the safety of theological (or mechanical) ignorance. If the Bible doesn't tell me exactly how I should bring up my children then what choice do I have but to insist that they do exactly what I say and hope that will work? (If the manual doesn't tell me exactly how to jack up my car and change the wheel, what choice do I have but to get on the phone and insist that someone do it for me, even if it is Christmas Day?) Or maybe we treat the Bible as if it were a low-tech version of Google that can be checked whenever we need a quick answer to an ephemeral problem, but the Bible is neither a car instruction manual nor a search engine. We don't read the Bible for information or to be told what to do. We read it in order to encounter God.

### **Encountering God**

The disciples on the road to Emmaus wanted to make sense of events they could not understand, but instead of an explanation they had an encounter. An encounter with Christ himself on the road, in the breaking of bread and in the scriptures (for their hearts burned within them as "he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures"). What they experienced was not a distant

historical event but an encounter with a living person, a person who is still alive and ready for further encounters today. "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction", as Pope Benedict XVI reminded us in *Deus Caritas Est* ("God is Love").<sup>1</sup>

As beautiful as it is in its own way, you can't have an encounter with a Volkswagen engine, and you certainly can't have an encounter with a VW Polo instruction manual. A handbook may answer (some of) our questions, but it is incapable of posing any. There is no give and take with an instruction manual. What happened on the way to Emmaus, by contrast, began with a series of questions. First from Jesus ("What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"). Then from Cleopas ("Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"). And then from Jesus again ("What things?"). In other words, there was a dialogue, and surely one of the most astounding ideas in Christianity is that "[t]he novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us".<sup>2</sup>

The heart of Christianity is not a book but a person. The Word of God is, first and foremost, Jesus Christ: not the Bible. The disciples on their way to Emmaus discovered that Emmaus was not their destination; their destination was the man they thought they had left behind forever. They learned that the sacred scriptures are sacred because they bear witness to Christ, and the same is true for us today. The Bible speaks to us of Christ: it is Christ who speaks to us when we read the Bible.

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1 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* ("God is Love"), 1.

2 Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* ("The Word of the Lord"), 6.

We think that our questions are important, that they take precedence, but when the disciples met Jesus on the road it was *he* who asked *them* questions because that is what happens when we have an encounter. At least, that is what happens when we encounter Christ. We find that we no longer call the shots. We cannot control the conversation. We are questioned when we thought that we were the ones doing the questioning.

That is why Pope Benedict XVI insisted that “the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book’”. The word of God cannot be restricted to words on a page, not even to words on the pages of the Bible: “the expression ‘word of God’... refers to the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father, made man”.<sup>3</sup> God wants us to have an encounter with him, not with a book. We read in order to start a conversation, or, even better, to resume a conversation that started before we were aware of it.

### Divine reading

If reading the Bible is one way of developing our relationship with God then our reading needs to be prayerful. Prayerful reading is one way of translating the Latin phrase *lectio divina* (though it can also be translated as holy or divine reading). *Lectio divina* fell out of fashion for many years and so may now sound rather daunting but, in its essence, it is quite simple, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explaining that it is where “the Word of God is so read and meditated that it becomes prayer”.<sup>4</sup>

Reading, meditation and prayer seem like very straightforward concepts but our understanding of these words has changed considerably over time. Reading for us usually means reading in silence. We would take a very

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1177.

dim view of anyone who chose to read the latest thriller out loud on the train during the daily commute, but reading for most people until relatively recent times meant reading out loud. They would have been baffled by the notion that reading out loud is a childish stage to be dispensed with as soon as humanly possible because they knew that when we read out loud we allow the words to affect us at the deepest level of our being. In reading aloud we develop “more than a visual memory of the written words”, one great writer tells us. “What results is a muscular memory of the words pronounced and an aural memory of the words heard.”<sup>5</sup> I am currently typing in near total darkness as I wait for my younger daughter to fall asleep. I could not tell you where each letter is on the keyboard, but my fingers retain a muscular memory of the keys’ respective positions that enables me to type accurately (for the most part). This muscular memory is incredibly useful but how much more valuable would an aural memory of words be, especially an aural memory of the words of scripture? With that sort of memory, we would be able to recall the words of the sacred text wherever we were and whatever we were doing. With that sort of memory, we could rid ourselves of the need for search engines.

Our memories have been atrophied but not destroyed altogether. We still have an aural memory of the Bible that comes from attending Mass regularly. Reading out loud is not restricted to children and Benedictine monks: we also hear the word of God each week in church. Why does this matter? Because “a deep impregnation with the words of Scripture... explains the extremely important phenomenon of reminiscence whereby the verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously evoke whole

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: a study of monastic culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 73.

quotations and, in turn, a scriptural phrase will suggest quite naturally allusions elsewhere in the sacred books".<sup>6</sup>

Reading out loud allows the words of the Bible, and thus the Word of God, to break through our defences, to get under the surface of our lives, to affect us at a fundamental level. We could, and often do, leave our reading there, but the practice of *lectio divina* encourages us to go a step further. When we meditate on what we have read – when, in other words, we give it our full attention, the attention of mind, emotions and will – we allow our whole self to be affected by the word of God. And when that happens we cannot do anything other than pray. In fact, when that happens we find that prayer has already welled up in us.

### Praying like cattle

The word that several great spiritual writers have used to describe this approach to prayer is "rumination". If we want to discover how best to pray, how best to read the sacred scriptures, we need to learn from cattle.

Cows' stomachs are wonderful organs. It is sometimes said that cows have four stomachs but, strictly speaking, they have one stomach with four compartments, the first of which – the rumen – has a capacity of about 184 litres (forty-nine gallons). The rumen is "a fermentation vat *par excellence*".<sup>7</sup> It is ruthlessly efficient in breaking down the hemicellulose and cellulose in grasses, shrubs and animal feed. The cow's rumen is an impressive anaerobic environment that produces not only volatile fatty acids but also huge amounts of carbon dioxide and methane (somewhere between eight and thirteen gallons per hour), which are expelled via a

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<sup>6</sup> Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> V.R. Kasaralikal, N.A. Patil, K. Ravikanth, A. Thakur and Shivi Maini, "Clinico-therapeutic evaluation of Ruchamax and Ruchamax-N in various digestive disorders and restoration of normal ruminal function", *International Journal of Phytopharmacy*, Vol. 4 (2), (Mar-Apr 2014), 67.

prodigious amount of silent belching or eructation, to use the technical term.

More relevant for anyone who wants to learn to pray more effectively is the process of rumination, or cud-chewing. Cows regurgitate the food they have eaten from the second compartment of their stomach – the reticulum – and chew it again to break it down into a manageable size. Squeezing out fluid from the bolus of partially digested material with their tongue, they reswallow it (to give the third compartment of the stomach something to do), and then, after a lot more chewing, they swallow the cud, allowing it to be digested in the fourth of their stomach compartments. All in all, it is an impressive way of breaking down huge amounts of life-giving material. *Lectio divina* begins with reading the words of scripture aloud, which slows us down and allows those words to penetrate to a deep level. Ruminating works in a similar way. Chewing the cud is a way of getting all the goodness out of the initial feed over an extended period of time. Rechewing what has already been swallowed is the essence of rumination. We can return again and again to what may have been a few minutes of reading snatched from a busy day. We are not obliged to digest our spiritual reading immediately, but can chew, swallow and then chew again.

### **Time for prayer**

If we were to pare it down to essentials, we could say this: in order to ruminate, all we need is something to chew on and plenty of time. The Bible provides us with plenty to chew on, so all we need to do is find time to chew. Unfortunately, the curse of our modern age is that none of us has enough time. One way of understanding the last hundred years is to see it as an era that has been dominated by the search for time-saving devices, from the car to the washing machine to

thousands upon thousands of apps. We have spent a huge amount of time searching for ways of saving time and yet the reality is that many of us work longer hours than ever, our chief regret being that we do not spend enough time with our families. We become overwhelmed by emails. We lose sight of reality while absorbed in social media. Dizzied by the internet's ability to distract, we forget to graze and never quite get round to ruminating.

The great value of *lectio divina* is that it can help us to slow down, read carefully and meditate prayerfully. It can give Our Lord the opening he is always looking for. We try to block out silence with noise, but ask any cow and she will tell you that it is extremely difficult to ruminate when the TV is on in the background, when the radio is playing or when headphones are shovelling music into every available cranial space. So, if we are serious about developing a relationship with God, we need not only to read our Bibles, but also to find time, space and quiet to be able to ruminate on what we have read.

To many parents this might seem like a laughable notion. As parents, we do not have the benefits of monastic silence. Instead of the liturgy of the hours, we grab minutes where we can. In the busyness and noise of each day, *lectio divina* might well appear to be a pipe dream. Praying like cattle might well seem an impossibility when we have domestic chores, children needing our attention and a job to hold down.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* suggests in a very beautiful passage that it is precisely in situations like these that we can encounter God in prayer. In a section headed simply "Today", it gives this wise advice:



We learn to pray at certain moments by hearing the Word of the Lord and sharing in his Paschal mystery, but his Spirit is offered us at all times, in the events of each day, to make prayer spring up from us. Jesus' teaching about praying to our Father is in the same vein as his teaching about providence: time is in the Father's hands; it is in the present that we encounter him, not yesterday nor tomorrow, but today: "O that *today* you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts."

Prayer in the events of each day and each moment is one of the secrets of the Kingdom revealed to "little children", to the servants of Christ, to the poor of the Beatitudes. It is right and good to pray so that the coming of the Kingdom of justice and peace may influence the march of history, but it is just as important to bring the help of prayer into humble, everyday situations; all forms of prayer can be the leaven to which the Lord compares the Kingdom.<sup>8</sup>



Praying in the events of each day could mean ruminating in the shower (though, admittedly, this can have serious consequences for household bills), ruminating while washing up or ruminating while having a tea break. It could also mean looking for moments of grace to open up before us at unexpected times and in unexpected ways.

It is easy to believe that if only this or that aspect of our life were different, all would be well with our spiritual life, our

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<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2659-2660.

work and our parenting. However, the story of the disciples on their way to Emmaus suggests that it is precisely in the here and now, in the messiness of today, that we meet Christ. The story of the disciples leaving Jerusalem for Emmaus also reminds us that, important as the scriptures are, reading the Bible is not the only way of encountering God. We meet God in the Bible, in other people and in the breaking of bread. We meet him when we are open to an encounter. The disciples could have refused to answer Jesus' opening question, citing the need to reach Emmaus quickly as their excuse. They could have walked off in a huff when the stranger told them they were foolish, and they certainly could have avoided eating with him that evening. Instead of taking these opportunities to wriggle out of an encounter, they chose instead to listen, took the rebuke, and showed true generosity by inviting him to dine with them. Like little children, they were humble enough to allow the encounter to happen.

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus shows us that the essential encounter with God takes place beyond the words on the page. That is why this book takes the form it does, each chapter starting with a question that is based on one or more biblical passages but not necessarily finishing with the same question. Reading the Bible prayerfully can take us away from the concerns we begin with and lead us into some very unexpected places. That is why we need to be open to wherever God wants to take us. The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus also reminds us who is in charge. I certainly do not claim to be an expert on parents, children or education. In fact, I am writing this book because I too am searching for answers: I want to understand my children better; I want to be a better parent; I want to make sense of education today. Even more importantly, I am searching for a daily encounter with Christ who answers our questions and poses plenty of his own as well. I have no

advice to give, but I know that the mysterious man – who was God – who accompanied the disciples on the road has all the answers we need.

In the course of the book, we will look at a wide range of biblical passages but we will keep returning to those passages that touch on the hidden life of Christ in the years before he began his public ministry. It is from these passages in particular that we can seek answers to our questions about parents, children and education today. If Christ's life was hidden during those first thirty years then ours can often seem hidden too. We do not always understand ourselves. We often struggle to know how we can best raise and educate our children. We can feel overwhelmed by the daily business of life. This book is written for anyone who is still on the journey, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, for anyone who doesn't yet have all the answers, whose life seems hidden and unimportant. By looking again at what the Word of God has to say to us today through the word of God, I hope that a new light will be shone in the darkness, in the places where our hidden lives meet the hiddenness of Christ.