



Dearest Friends, a letter by Laurence Freeman from
the WCCM Newsletter September 2023

We are beginning to sense how great a watershed the Covid pandemic has been for our world. It has made us frightened to come out, retreating into the comfort zone of virtual zoom reality, and it has shaken our trust in authentic authority. For many it created a false solitude that compounded the pre-existing epidemic of loneliness which only interiority, true solitude in unity with others, can cure.

And yet (beware of single explanations) at the same time, and while it was keeping people locked indoors, it helped many to search more deeply for the inner room of contemplation. Our community's online programme was born during Covid specifically as 'a contemplative path through the crisis'.

Over its first months, I noticed a familiar face present at nearly every online event. When I spoke to them later, this person told me of the deep personal conversion they had undergone during the shutdown. Every online event took the process deeper. As I listened, I could see the signs of this personal change: a greater openness of mind and gentleness of manner, a sense of humility at what they had undergone, a new tenderness.

It's the same message for all but there's a different take-up for everyone: Like the business student I spoke with about his learning to meditate who taught me that the path of true metanoia doesn't always run smooth. He had started a daily practice of meditation, once a day. I asked him what he felt about the 'work of the mantra'. He said 'well I feel it's right and I am drawn to it. But it's difficult'. So, I asked what he did when he found it difficult: he said he put on his headphones and listened to a guided meditation or soft music. But he was open to discuss this and at the end seemed grateful to hear what I, or any experienced meditator, would have suggested: stay with the mantra, gently and faithfully, and take the headphones off.

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Believe me. Even with the mantra, meditating outdoors, under a hot sun, amid a crowd of hundreds of young people, with those closest to you singing 'Happy Birthday' in every tongue at maximum volume, is a challenge. It was a crazily wise idea formed among the twenty-two young adult meditators (from Indonesia to Mexico) with whom I attended the World Youth Day last month. We sat in a circle on the ground hoping to be a sign with our 'flash meditation mob'. Signifying what? That you don't have to be solemn or churchy to enter the inner room of contemplation; that meditation is a part of life like birthday parties and travel and meeting new people.



The unity of our small flash group connected and, so we hoped, witnessed to the boisterous crowd around us. Altogether, the million and a half young Christians from a record 200 countries richly represented the chaotic catholicity of the church, a huge spectrum of individuals, communities and types of theology. Anyone who thinks the church can enforce standard beliefs and practices had better read the Acts of the Apostles and come to the next World Youth Day in Seoul. I'm not saying it was the Heavenly Jerusalem yet – often more like the earthly one on a global scale. But as the waves of joyful young people intermingled, flowing through the streets of Lisbon, the question that nudged me was 'what is the essence of this experience of unity?' Not a football team or a rock star. Nor just one theological preference. The source of such unity is not easy to explain. It lies beyond the horizon of our vision. But then I remembered Wittgenstein, the difficult-to-understand philosopher of the simple. He said that to understand all human beliefs and behaviour, we must take into account the vital distinction between 'what can be expressed and what cannot be expressed but only shown'. To those with eyes to see and ears to hear – at times noisily and at other times silently – this unity was being *shown*.



I couldn't think of any political rally or sporting event that would unite so many people on such a scale. If only the church was better at living out this immanent unity in its ordinary life; and if the media was more objective in reporting what this unique kind of celebration of inter-cultural shows about human potential

Of course, the whole event was a flash-multitude of a million or more, not something to confuse with the challenge of the normal. Yet for its short week of super-vitality and despite its magnitude, it was on a human scale. The young meditators were a diverse human group small enough to both recognise and embrace the big differences between us, individually, linguistically and culturally, from an investment banker to a theology student. It was also authentic enough to open the eye of the heart to a mysterious personal presence, who could be shown but not photographed and who was the source of our unity beyond our inner horizons, the mutual friend of our friendship.



Our mutual friend, Jesus, showed us that unity isn't uniformity. It can't be pushed inside a box which an external force can stifle or suppress, control or contain. The long history of social and personal oppression shows the resilience of humanity's unity in freedom. This ultimately irrepressible source of unity is ever the enemy of oppressive forces. Nevertheless, the dark fantasy of Orwell's '1984' or Simone Weil's prophecy of 'totalitarian bureaucracy', seems ever more real today in the mass surveillance and enforcement of pitiless control in China or in the secret algorithmic worms of mass media. Anonymous forces driven by greed for power can only degrade our sacred human freedom and divine catholicity if we let them.

In its perverted application of science, technology and media, the language of mass communication becomes lies and nonsense, absurd denials of the obvious, which few dare to expose. Truth is twisted into alternative realities, peace becomes the result of aggression, justice is betrayed in the warfare of special interests, love is reduced to desire, conversation to a jungle noise. Without the defence of reality, for which the contemplative mind is prepared to sacrifice itself, the best inventions of the human mind are enslaved into the service of the gods of mammon and nationalism. Creative imagination is possessed by the demon of pride into devising more clinical means of mass destruction; forms of 'communication' are deliberately designed to obscure, addict and polarise; the earth sciences capable of solving our self-made crises are misused to exploit the remaining finite resources of the biosphere; and economics, capable of achieving fairer distribution of wealth, expands the gap between the rich and poor and alienates us all from our common home on this fragile planet.



Rhetorical lists of our problems today are easy to make. Yet, once we have seen the essential point and are ready to ask questions about how to change - our personal lives or the fate of humanity - we should suspend analysis and ask the redemptive question that initiates real change of direction. The first transformative step of recovery is asking: 'what can I do?' Those who poured out into the Judean wilderness to find a prophet asked John the Baptist; 'What shall we do?' Cassian and Germanus asked their desert teacher, 'give us a practice'.

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There are many arts within the art of prayer. Practiced in good faith, they do not exclude each other. Like different instruments in an orchestra, even if they seem to use very different means they all lead into the one prayer of the Spirit.

There is the art of the work of silence, the grand poverty of spirit as Cassian called it which has formed and renews our community. We gain this poverty, the first Beatitude, by the 'renunciation of all the riches of thought and imagination'. It is the central understanding of prayer in the whole desert tradition: the 'laying aside of thoughts'. We shared it with many of the young pilgrims in Lisbon who seemed hungry for spaces of silence and stillness especially amid the constant activity and noise. But another art of prayer, the reading of scripture, which by contrast uses words and imagination, enrichingly interweaves with the way of silence and mental stillness. We need both as a plane needs two wings to stay on course.

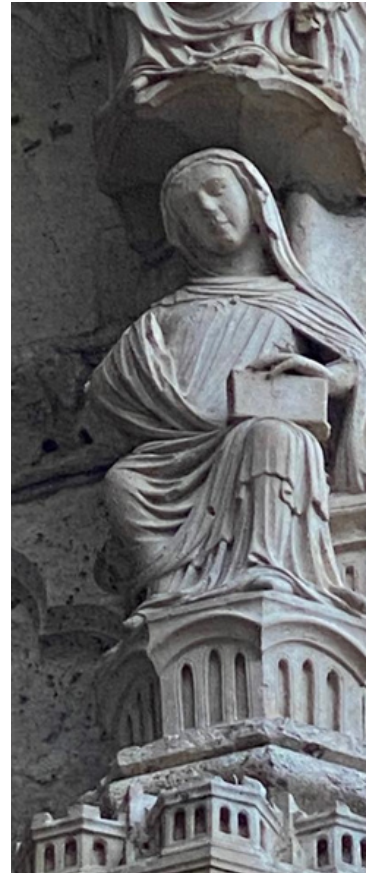
When saying the mantra gets hard meditators who have learned their art resist the temptation to put on their headphones. Even with a sense of failure we can embrace and enjoy the work of the Word, 'in prosperity and adversity', and learn what it means to turn life into a pilgrimage by being a pilgrim in everything. Then we benefit from each step we take on our daily path, even the backward ones, welcoming the friendship of others and the many nurturing practices and surprises that enrich the path.

One of the most nourishing of these complementary practices is the art of reading wisdom texts in a way that allows them to read us, transform our perspectives of living and reveal that the sacred is everywhere. As we learn how to read in this way, the texts subtly, often imperceptibly merge throughout the day with our thoughts, speech and memories. Like friends, companions, teachers they become inexhaustible wells of wisdom.

Later this month I am starting a series of online sessions called 'Between the Lines: How to read the Bible and other Sacred Texts'. Reading in the way that sacred texts should be approached so that we can discover their hidden treasures is one of those rare things of great value: something that is a good thing in itself. Freshly each time, it opens new wonders of consciousness, always refreshing our tired minds or low spirits, while also preparing us to return to meditation and the essential work of poverty.



The wisdom of great texts like the Bible weave in, merge and overlap with those in other traditions. Wisdom is a language of revelation with many dialects, many tongues. Following these tracks with patience and attention, we understand how we are already members of a great family of wisdom, greater than we could imagine. We always have many more relatives than we think, and the more we discover them the more we experience the boundless kinship with the living and the dead, with those far and near, remembered and lost in memory. All humanity belongs to the family of wisdom which expresses itself in great writing passed down the millennia. As in a large family reunion which brings different generations and cultures together, the different parts of the clan as well as each individual feels an enrichment of identity by celebrating in unity all our differences. Every time we read a sacred text – not so much commentaries but the original - we celebrate that unity.



But for many churchgoers, and followers of other faiths, scripture is only heard mumbled from the lectern, then preached on, usually moralistically rather than mystically, from a pulpit. Without attentive hearing there is no transformative listening and without listening the muscle of attention atrophies as it is doing in our age of distraction. Basic knowledge of the texts and traditions is necessary: less than half of self-identifying US Christians can even name all four gospels. In inattentive minds the half-heard, over-preached words become a jumble. The empty spaces between the lines that offer us room to expand and soar are often jammed with slogans and the sacred quickly becomes the political.

Words we think we know pass in one ear and out the other without ever awakening the mind with the great surprise that dawns by recognising new realities. Kafka described true reading as 'like an axe for the frozen sea within us'.

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For many, especially the younger generation, not only sacred texts but any form of reading from a page is frighteningly unfamiliar. It makes them feel their loneliness. A student once told me she preferred to study on her computer in a noisy café because she found the silence of the library creepy. Another told me that he derived most of his knowledge from YouTube and hardly ever read from a physical page. But after starting to meditate, he had gradually been drawn to read books for the first time. He revealingly described his sense of the difference between word and image. YouTube was easier, more passive, but he didn't retain its content very well. Reading was harder but gave the surprise of 'meeting another mind'. What he read entered long-term memory. This suggests what St Bernard meant when he spoke of the 'word becoming flesh' when we attend to it lovingly and allow it to slide from mental to heart consciousness.

St Benedict made daily reading one of the three pillars of the monks' life. He prescribed an extra hour during Lent. This is the more surprising as literacy rates were low in the 6th century, so many would have learned to read only as they learned to live the monastic life. It was part of their learning how to pray. Nevertheless, he seemed to believe that all monks could – in fact, should – read; and, like many abbots since, he had to exhort them to make it a serious and regular practice. Today, many busy emailers in contemplative communities struggle to 'make time to read', just like their counterparts in more worldly occupations.



Why this emphasis on reading in the contemplative tradition? Not in order to make us scholars or winners on quiz shows or pass exams. But because the process of attentive reading sheds light on our interiority and enticingly draws us towards the inner room. Reading is beneficial for everyone because the attention demanded leads to stillness and so to a clearer, less self-centred mind. For the contemplative practitioner it is an essential part of their life. Every child needs to learn how to read. As contemplatives we need to learn how to read in this way. A little training helps us to engage with scripture and wisdom texts in a transformative way. I hope my course will help people to discover this for themselves because in this, as in any learning, experience is the teacher.

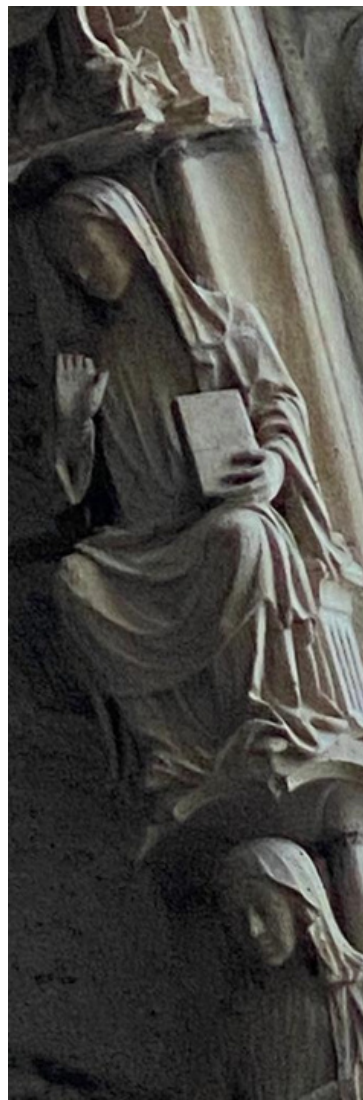
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The art of reading is the first stage of the art of prayer itself because like pure prayer, 'lectio' helps me take the attention off myself and see that the essence of pure prayer is other-centred attention

This type of reading is not for entertainment or information. It is for mental training and deep enrichment in the knowledge of the self. It is a journey of discovery that expands to show how all relationships of daily life – the ones we enjoy or struggle with or merely dream may happen one day – will lead into vaster and more interior spaces.

Reading familiarises us with our own minds and makes for a healthy relationship with ourselves. To read sacred or beautiful texts well is to become more transparent and honest with ourselves because they repay our attention by reading us. Reading mirrors our mind as mind mirrors what we read. But with the greatest texts we see through the looking-glass. We cross the frontier of language and imagination. Our "relationship with God" is liberated from duality as we move into union with the web of relationships that make up the world.

Actually, this simply describes the human journey itself. Meditation, supported by a good diet and discipline of reading with other contemplative practices and a commitment to work as service, does not explain but shows us what being human means. This sustains the lifelong process of metanoia, changing our mind and its worn-out habits and expanding our horizons of vision. What we see is what we become. In a culture as addictively fixated on images as is ours, re-learning the art of reading offers a way back to the visionary capacity - beyond imaging - of the contemplative mind.



Offer your very selves to him...the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will discern., what is good, acceptable and whole.
(Rom 12:1-4)

How does this degree of change happen? Life is a buffet of catastrophic events, excruciating losses, exhilarating celebrations and profound healings. But the deepest changes unfold quietly, out of plain sight, unstoppably and with an overpoweringly gentle and generous sense of meaning. Wisdom texts, like the Tao Te Ching for example, provoke us to understand why 'peace and quiet govern the world', even when we see the world in turmoil. And in a world of bursting agendas we are reminded, as in Psalm 46, why we should 'be still and know that I am God'.

In the coming series of talks I would also like to show how reading these universal texts needs direct, not second-hand contact. Let us read them with our own eyes. This releases a spring of joy that is so often blocked for modern people because personal experience is so often screened and externalised. To learn to read in this way we need to be lured away from screens. The bait is simply what gives us joy and teaches us to prefer the real and unpackaged over the imitation.

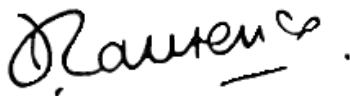


Meditation and places, like Bonnevaux, where meditation is practiced daily are more than escape routes from the problems of the world. They point, however humanly, to the sacrifice of attention we need to make to the real. They are more than about re-charging drained batteries. They are transformative. The process of metanoia begun with meditation in common continues back home and back at work. The experience of self and its new way of seeing is free and freeing for those who take the risk of daily practice and live each day in transformation. The way is the biggest challenge: to trust the simplest thing we can find.

Contemplative experience nurtured by the twin practices of meditation and sacred reading simplifies everything. It allows the paradox of reality to open like a flower and germinate the seeds that become the fruits of the spirit. Wonderfully, meditation merges with daily life. And the places, like Bonnevaux, where we can learn the pilgrimage of metanoia and return to refresh the practice, become an everywhere.

With much love

Laurence Freeman OSB

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small flourish at the end.

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