

CHAPTER 6

Caveat Lector

Lectio divina is a way of reading the Scriptures that is congruent with the way the Scriptures serve the Christian community as a witness to God's revelation of himself to us. It is the wise guidance developed through the centuries of devout Bible reading to discipline us, the readers of Scripture, into appropriate ways of understanding and receiving this text so that it is formative for the way we live our lives, not merely making an impression on our minds or feelings. It intends the reading of Scripture to be a permeation of our lives by the revelation of God.

Reading the Bible, if we do not do it rightly, can get us into a lot of trouble. The Christian community is as concerned with *how* we read the Bible as *that* we read it. It is not sufficient to place a Bible in a person's hands with the command, "Read it." That is quite as foolish as putting a set of car keys in an adolescent's hands, giving him a Honda, and saying, "Drive it." And just as dangerous. The danger is that in having our hands on a piece of technology, we will use it ig-

norantly, endangering our lives and the lives of those around us; or that, intoxicated with the power that the technology gives us, we will use it ruthlessly and violently.

For print is technology. We pick up a Bible and find that we have God's word in our hands, *our hands*. We can now handle it. It is easy enough to suppose that we are in control of it, that we can use it, that we are in charge of applying it wherever, whenever, and to whomever we wish without regard to appropriateness or conditions.

There is more to the Honda than the technology of mechanics. And there is more to the Bible than the technology of print. Surrounding the machine technology of the Honda there is a world of gravity and inertia, values and velocity, surfaces and obstructions, Chevrolets and Fords, traffic regulations and the highway patrol, other drivers whether drunk or sober, snow and ice and rain. There is far more to driving a car than turning a key in the ignition and stepping on the accelerator. Those who don't know that are soon dead or maimed.

And those who don't know the conditions implicit in the technology of the Bible are likewise dangerous to themselves and others. And so, as we hand out Bibles and urge people to read them, it is imperative that we also say, *caveat lector*, let the reader beware.

Men and women shopping in the market for vegetables and meat, for carpets and skirts, for horses and

automobiles have historically been warned by their experienced parents and grandparents, *caveat emptor*, let the buyer beware. The market is not always what it seems. More is going on here than a simple exchange of goods. Sellers and buyers seldom share identical values and goals. Sellers are not well known for looking out for the best interests of buyers. *Caveat emptor*, let the buyer beware.

And let the reader beware. Just having print on the page and knowing how to distinguish nouns from verbs is not enough. I might own a morocco leather Bible, having paid fifty dollars for it, but I don't own the word of God to do with what I want; *God* is sovereign. The word of God is not my possession. The words printed on the pages of my Bible give witness to the living and active revelation of the God of creation and salvation, the God of love who became the Word made flesh in Jesus, and I had better not forget it. If in my Bible reading I lose touch with this livingness, if I fail to listen to this living Jesus, submit to this sovereignty, and respond to this love, I become arrogant in my knowing and impersonal in my behavior. An enormous amount of damage is done in the name of Christian living by bad Bible reading. *Caveat lector*, let the reader beware.

A question Jesus posed to the religion scholar (the *nomikos*) who met him one day on the road to Jerusalem and commenced to grill him focuses our attention in these matters: "How do you read?" (*pōs*

anaginōskeis, Luke 10:26). *How* do you read this, not *what* have you just read?¹

Jesus' question is his answer to the scholar's question. The scholar had just asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It appears on the surface to be a perfectly legitimate question. But Luke, who is telling us this story, was on to something that was just below the surface. He lets us know that the religion scholar's question was hostile. The scholar wasn't asking for information or for counsel on how to live appropriately before God; his question was put forward "to test Jesus" (*ekpeiradzōn*). He wanted to provoke Jesus, or argue with him, or trip him up in some way or other. The same verb (*ekpeiradzein*) was used earlier by Luke to designate what the Devil was up to with Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:12), and in its noun form it is what Jesus a few lines later in the story (11:4) will teach us to pray for protection against (*peirasmon*). We don't know precisely what was behind the religion scholar's question, but it is clear enough that it wasn't an innocent question. The man was out to "get" Jesus somehow or other and use Scripture to do it.

Jesus' question evokes a correct answer from the scholar, an accurate and appropriate quotation of the double love command drawn from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus readily gives his imprimatur to the man — "you have given the right answer." Jesus had himself, after all, combined the two texts in a conversation reported by Mark and Matthew in

which a religion scholar had similarly questioned him (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31). There was nothing wrong with the scholar's knowledge of Scripture. But there was something terribly wrong in the way he read it, the *how* of his reading. This becomes evident when the scholar quibbles, "wanting to justify himself." He asks, "And who is my neighbor?"

Why does the scholar ask for a definition? Clearly, because he needs to defend himself against responding to the text personally. Defining "neighbor" depersonalizes the neighbor, turns him or her into an object, a thing over which he can take control, do with whatever he wants. But it also depersonalizes the scriptural text. He wants to talk *about* the text, treat the text as a thing, dissect it, analyze it, discuss it — endlessly. But Jesus won't play that game. The scholar has just quoted words of Holy Scripture that witness to the living word of God. They are words to be listened to, submitted to, obeyed, *lived*. So instead of inviting the scholar to join him in a Bible study of Deuteronomy and Leviticus under the shade of a nearby oak tree, Jesus tells him a story, one of his most famous, the Good Samaritan story, concluding, as he had begun, with a question, "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man ...?" The scholar is impaled by the question: the words of Scripture can no longer be handled by means of definition, "who is my neighbor?" The text insists on participation, "will you be a neighbor?" *Jesus* insists on participation. Jesus dismisses the scholar with a command, "Go and

do..." Live what you read. We read the Bible in order to live the word of God.

Lectio divina cultivates this personal, participatory attentiveness and thus trains us in the discipline of reading Scripture rightly. At every turn of the page it poses Jesus' question to us: "How do you read?"

Here is another *caveat* that requires posting: words written are dead words. There is no life in them: "the letter kills" (2 Cor. 3:6 NRSV). Reading, as such, even if it is reading the Bible (maybe especially if it is reading the Bible) is nothing more than a devout stroll through a cemetery taking rubbings of inscriptions from ancient tombstones and grave markers. All those words written, confined in the books of the world, buried in the libraries of the world, are dead words. But it is not as bad as that; these are not just dead words but dead words awaiting resurrection: for "the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

Lectio divina finds itself in the company of the Galilean women who "prepared spices and ointments" (Luke 23:56) after the crucifixion, planning on the next day to honor and give dignity to the recently deceased body of Jesus, the Word made flesh. These women, when they arrive at the tomb, do not find what they expected ("they did not find the body") but learn to their total surprise from an angel that they are dealing not with a dead Jesus but with a live Jesus ("Why do you seek the living among the dead?"). Not the Word of God dead and buried in a tomb, but the

Word of God resurrection-alive in the neighborhood. They leave their spices and ointments at the tomb — they have no use for them; Jesus has no use for them. They are on their way, ready to meet and follow and listen to the Word alive, Jesus. Ready to join the company of the Emmaus pilgrims, listening to Jesus interpret “to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Lectio divina is the deliberate and intentional practice of making the transition from a kind of reading that treats and handles, however reverently, Jesus dead to a way of reading that frequents the company of friends who are listening to, accompanying, and following Jesus alive.

One more *caveat lector*. Words written are radically removed from their originating context, which is the living voice. And there is far more involved in listening to a living voice than reading a written word. Words are spoken and heard before they are written and read. Language was spoken long, long before it was written. There are still communities that get along satisfactorily without a written language, but none that survive without speech. Words are first of all an oral/aural phenomenon. Most of the words in our Scriptures were not formed first in writing — they were spoken and heard. The so-called “biblical world” that we orient ourselves in by means of the Bible for the most part did not have a Bible to read. Many, many generations of our biblical ancestors believed and

obeyed and worshipped God without a script. They had the word of God, true enough, but they heard it, they listened to it. The word of God came by means of a voice.² We need to be repeatedly reminded of this lest we lose touch with the basic orality of God’s word in our lives.

But it is not only the timbre and tone and rhythm of the personal speaking voice that disappears in the act of writing, it is also the entire complex intricacy of other voices buzzing in the background, children interrupting with demands and questions, thrushes singing, the sound of the rain on the roof, the fragrance of juniper burning in the fireplace, the bouquet of the wine and texture of the bread that accompanies conversation at the table. The moment a word or a sentence is written it is detached from its origins and lands on the page as isolated as an artifact in a museum or a specimen in the laboratory. In the museum and laboratory we usually count this removal from context an advantage: we can now label it, define its properties, pick it up, turn it this way and that in the light, weigh it, measure it, write about it. With rocks and bones, pottery shards and computer chips, blood and urine specimens — things — the less context we have, the more exact we can be. Context contaminates and interferes with precision. But not so with words. So *caveat lector*.

Words are inherently ambiguous. They are never exact: the character of the person speaking influences how we interpret them; the attentiveness or intelli-

gence of the listener affects how they are understood; place and weather and circumstances all play a part in both the speaking and the hearing. The more we are “in context” when language is used, the more likely we are to get it. Barely suppressed irritation and impatient finger tapping, hesitations and silences, gestures and grins and grimaces are all part of it. But the moment the words are written, all of that, or at least most of it, is gone. Even when the context is described, the complex simultaneity of interplay and intricacy is lost. Which means that when a word is written it is reduced. A word written is less than a word spoken — and sometimes not even the same thing at all. Walter Ong has provided us with a careful assessment of the immense difference involved in hearing a word and reading a word.

We are the most abject prisoners of the literate culture in which we have matured. Even with the greatest effort, contemporary man finds it exceedingly difficult, and in many instances quite impossible, to sense what the spoken word actually is. He feels it as a modification of something which normally is or ought to be written.³

Which, of course, is why many of us prefer words written to words spoken. It is simpler, we are more in control, we don't have to deal with the complexities of difficult, neurotic, or insufferably boring people. If we don't like what we are reading we can shut the book and pick up another — or go shopping, or take a walk, or spend an hour or so in the garden.

But *caveat lector*: we do not read the Bible in order to reduce our lives to what is convenient to us or manageable by us — we want to get in on the great invisibles of the Trinity, the soaring adorations of the angels, the quirky cragginess of the prophets, and ... Jesus.

Jesus' lead-off parable in each of the first three Gospels emphasizes that the centrality of the word of God in our lives is not about reading but about listening: “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (cf. Matt. 13:3-9; Mark 4:3-9; Luke 8:5-8) The punch line of each of John of Patmos's sermons to his seven churches is similar: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22 NRSV). Listening is what we do when someone speaks to us; reading is what we do when someone writes to us. Speaking comes first. Writing is derivative from speaking. And if we are to get the full force of the word, God's word, we need to recover its atmosphere of spokenness.

Some years ago I was leading a youth group on a summer camping expedition. The director of the camp had purchased at bargain prices a vast quantity of dehydrated foods from an army surplus outlet. For one particular evening meal to be cooked on the trail I selected pork chops from the pantry, paper thin dehydrated pork chops, plenty of pork chops for ravenous fourteen-year-old boys, but weighing only a few ounces. The directions instructed us to soak them in a bucket of water for one hour, which we did. We

watched in amazement as they took on water and were transformed in the bucket into large, juicy pork chops. A great conclusion to a strenuous day on the trail was anticipated. We could hardly wait. By this time we had a fire of hot coals ready. We placed six pork chops in a large skillet and propped it over the coals. As soon as the heat penetrated the skillet, the chops virtually disappeared — in two minutes the water was gone and we were left with the paper thin slices of pig that we had started out with.

There is a sense in which the Scriptures are the word of God dehydrated, with all the originating context removed — living voices, city sounds, camels carrying spices from Seba and gold from Ophir snorting down in the bazaar, fragrance from lentil stew simmering in the kitchen — all now reduced to marks on thin onion-skin paper. We make an effort at rehydrating them; we take these Scriptures and spend an hour or so in Bible study with friends or alone in prayerful reading. But five minutes later, on our way to work, plunged into the tasks of the day for which they had seemed to promise sustenance, there's not much left of them — only ink on india paper. We find that we are left with the words of the Bible but without the world of the Bible. Not that there is anything wrong with the words as such, it is just that without the biblical world — the intertwined stories, the echoing poetry and prayers, Isaiah's artful thunder and John's extravagant visions — the words, like those seed words in Jesus' parable that land on pavement

or in gravel or among weeds, haven't take root in our lives.

Lectio divina is the strenuous effort that the Christian community gives (Austin Farrer's "formidable discipline"!) to rehydrating the Scriptures so that they are capable of holding their own original force and shape in the heat of the day, maintaining their context long enough to get fused with or assimilated into our context, the world we inhabit, the clamor of voices in the daily weather and work in which we live. But it takes more than an hour in the bucket to accomplish what is needed. *Lectio divina* is a way of life that develops "according to the Scriptures." It is not just a skill that we exercise when we have a Bible open before us but a life congruent with the Word made flesh to which the Scriptures give witness. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that the word of God originated when "long ago God *spoke* to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has *spoken* to us by a Son.... Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have *heard...*" (Heb. 1:1-2; 2:1; emphasis added). These are spoken words delivered to us by "so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1) and now written in our Holy Scriptures. It is the task of *lectio divina* to get those words heard and listened to, words written in ink now rewritten in blood.

1. AV, RSV, and NIV all translate Luke's *pōs* literally as "how." The NRSV translation, "what," is unfortunate, obscuring an essential detail.

2. James Barr is vigorous in making this point, emphasizing the necessity of personally recognizing the basic orality of what is given to us in Scripture: "In what we call 'biblical times', or in much of them, there was as yet no Bible. The

men of the Bible were, as we now see it, engaged in the process out of which our Bible in the end would emerge, but they themselves had no Bible...the time of the Bible was a time when the Bible was not yet there...." See his *Holy Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), pp. 1-2.

3. Walter Ong, S.J., *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 19.