

The Bedell/Boyle Lecture 1995

LECTIO DIVINA IN THE MONASTIC TRADITION

Rt. Revd. Christopher Dillon (OSB)

Response

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INTRODUCTION

The Bedell/Boyle Lecture Series

The National Bible Society of Ireland has inaugurated an annual lecture series known as the Bedell/Boyle Lecture. It is intended that the series will provide an opportunity to promote the Bible and the effective use of the Holy Scriptures. Each year a speaker of stature will be asked to lecture on a topic relating some aspect of the Bible to current developments. It is hoped to publish each Lecture.

The Lecture series is named in honour of William Bedell (1571-1642) Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, because of his commitment to the translation of the Bible into Irish. Linked with Bedell's Irish Bible, published for the first time in 1685, is Hon. Robert Boyle (1626-1691) who ensured the publication of Bedell's Bible. Boyle was very committed to Bible distribution and he was a distinguished scientist known for Boyle's Law. Thus key elements of modern Bible Society work - translation, publication and distribution - were foreshadowed by these two men.

The 1995 Lecture was given by the Rt. Rev. Christopher Dillon, Abbot of Glenstal Abbey, Murroe, Co. Limerick on 20 October 1995 in Newman House, St. Stephens Green, Dublin. The Response was given by Rev. Katherine Meyer of Abbey Presbyterian Church and Chaplain to Trinity College Dublin.

We are pleased to publish the complete text of the Lecture and the Response and believe that this will aid our reflection and response to the living Word of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Judith Wilkinson

Also in this series:

Alive and Active *Dei Verbum* and Ireland Today, Most Rev. Donal Murray (1992)

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THE BEDELL-BOYLE LECTURE 1995

LECTIO DIVINA IN THE MONASTIC TRADITION

“Make my word your home
and then you will be my disciples.” (Jn 8,31)

Some months ago, I received a letter from an evangelical distributor of scriptural material, asking me whether it was the practice of monks to spend time reading the Bible. That the question had to be asked was in itself something of a shock to me, because I might just as well been asked whether monks eat. But the question did at least indicate to me that the reading of Scripture, which has not been a feature of popular piety in the Roman Catholic tradition, is still presumed to be somewhat unusual. Indeed, it is well known that the King James translation of the Bible was on the Roman Index of Forbidden Books. In the same vein, I remember my father quoting his father, whose supplied reading material was that Bible during his various spells as a guest of HM's Government in one or other of the country's gaols at the time of the Land Struggle in the 1880s, remarking that Holy Mother Church was perfectly right to discourage the reading of scripture, because what was not offensive to pious minds was unreadably boring... but he was not a monk. I mention that, only to illustrate an attitude of educated Roman Catholics to Holy Scripture, in recent times, which would justify that question to which I referred, at the outset.

Coming to this topic as a monk, rather than as a scholar, I propose to say something about the monastic reading of scripture, in days gone by, and then to say something, from my own experience, of the activity in the contemporary monastic world. My experience tells me that *lectio divina* is generally misunderstood and, therefore, dangerously undervalued in the Christian world, including the world of the modern monk.

When I first joined the monastery, I was told to read my way through the Bible, as *everyone* should read it through at least once in his lifetime. I had tried this, once before, as a pious youth, and lost heart somewhere in the middle of Leviticus. But this time, my wise novicemaster gave me a useful guide to get me through both the Old Testament and St. Paul. The plan was to read the OT in the morning and NT in the evening. I discovered afterwards that this was because St. Benedict advised that Kings should not be read in the evening. At about the same time, I remember being struck by the power of the texts from Isaiah which were being read at the monastic offices in the church, during that first Advent when I began to be aware of the progression of the liturgical year and its seasons. Again, I found myself exposed to a wealth of Latin chants, partly understood but regularly repeated, so that I often knew the rhythm of the text — even by heart — before I knew their meaning. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I was bombarded by Scripture, for much of the day. In that, my experience was probably much like that of generations of novice monks and nuns for the past fifteen centuries or so.

The earliest references to this practice pre-date the monastic movement and are to be found in the circle of Origen, the great Christian teacher of Alexandria, at the end of the second century, as a recommended feature of life for all Christians. Origen borrowed from the Jewish tradition of reading in the synagogue where the study of the scriptures was pursued with particular care, *prosechein*, was the characteristic term used to describe the activity, turning the mind to, devoting oneself to, the meaning of scripture,

as one reads it. For Origen, such reading is the basis for any serious asceticism, because it gradually weans one from the cares of the world, as befits every Christian. It is the foundation of all knowledge, with understanding to be prayed for, where nature fails. And, failing understanding, the reader exercised humility before the mysterious word of God. At the same time this reading pre-supposes an ascetic life, because the knowledge of God will not enter a heart which is not pure. The divine learning, thus assimilated, transforms the mentality and the behaviour of the Christian, along the path leading to divinisation.

To this end, various levels of understanding were identified as useful in drawing the meaning from the text: the historical, or literal, and the moral were the most applicable. Then there was the allegorical level, which Origen loved to press to fantastical excess; and, finally, there was the rarified level of the analogical or mystical. They were later identified by Cassian with reference to their application to the city of Jerusalem, for example; the literal meaning is found in the historical city; the moral is found in the human soul, the allegorical in the Church of Christ, and the analogical in the heavenly city. This method of reading and interpretation evolved into a convoluted system, in later years, but it established a Christian tradition of perseverance in, and the humble reading of, scripture as the word of God... But not without difficulty. One of the letters of Pope Gregory the Great urges his people, "Apply yourself, every day, I beg you, to meditating on the words of your creator. Learn to know the heart of God in the words of God" (Ep. 4,31). Inevitably, however, the cares of this life tended to supervene, and the practice was to become more a specialist characteristic of the monastic way of life.

The specifically monastic tradition begins a century after Origen, with St. Jerome and St. Basil who developed Origen's ideas, stressing the role of the memory and the heart (St. Jerome) and savouring the text (Basil) in the whole exercise of *lectio divina*.

Contemporaneous with these figures is the extraordinary phenomenon of the monasticism of the Egyptian Desert. The desire to commune with God in solitude was evolving into a way of life, *solus soli Deo vacans* (Rufinus). Unbroken communion, in perpetual prayer, was the goal of men and women from all walks of life who made their way to the company of the fathers; and exposure to the Word of God in Scripture was their immediate means of achieving it. Cyprian of Carthage formulated the maxim which encapsulated this mentality and inspired subsequent ages, "May you be either at reading or at constant prayer; God speaking to you or you speaking to God" (Ad Donatum c.15). The mothers and fathers of the desert believed that they heard God speaking to them, personally and immediately, in the words of Scripture. The story of St. Anthony's chance hearing of the text, "Go and sell what you own and give it to the poor; and then, come, follow me" (Lk. 18,22) and his immediate decision to put the command into practice illustrates the point. It is not that the early monks were fundamentalist, but rather that they interpreted their hearing of the Word of Scripture as a privileged occasion for meeting God's word. The lives of the Desert Fathers abound with similar examples, naive and even comical, perhaps, but always with a simplicity which might be holy. From the little we know of those days, it would seem that reading, itself, would not have played a large part in their lives. The usual experience of Scripture would have been aural, in the context of the liturgical assemblies, where the Word was proclaimed with great solemnity and memorised as heard. It would not be too much to say of people in those days that their memory was their book. At the same time, the celebration of the Word in a liturgical setting was eucharistic in character; both Augustine and John Chrysostom preached constantly on the proclaimed texts, as the breaking of the Word among the faithful. We are speaking about a time, don't forget, when texts of the complete bible

were rare, texts which were hand-written, sometimes in the Greek of the Septuagint and Koine and sometimes in Latin translations, until St. Jerome drew everything together in his monumental Latin Vulgate translation, at the end of the fourth century. The memory of texts heard, then, was the only book for most people to read, monks included. Towards the end of the Desert period in Egypt, St. Pachomius seems to have arrived at much the same idea as Jerome and Basil, though quite independently, in laying great stress on memorising both the psalter and the New Testament as basic material for all his monks, among whom illiteracy was not tolerated. For him, it was obviously not the exercise of *lectio* that counted, so much as recalling the remembered text to bear fruit in one's life. His principle was that of Romans 15, "Everything written in the Scriptures was written to teach us, in order that we might have hope through the patience and encouragement which the Scriptures give us."

It is against that background of scripture-centeredness, mediated to the West by Cassian through his Conferences and Institutes in the fifth century, that the Rule of St. Benedict, appearing at the beginning of the sixth century, prescribes godly reading, *lectio divina*, as one of the activities which are to occupy every monk's day. It is to be done in much the same way as manual work, to keep the monk from idleness and worse, for three hours a day, and all day on Sunday; this in a day which has seven or eight services in the oratory. It was an activity which was regarded as physically, as well as intellectually, quite demanding, because it was always done aloud. In fact, if someone were unwilling or unable to stick at it, on Sundays, he was to be given some light task, to keep him occupied (RB 48). The meal, too, was accompanied by reading in some form and it was certainly not secular in character; and the reader was to be given an extra allowance of food and drink to keep him going. There was a final session of public reading of material, referred to as "the conferences", every evening after the meal, while the brethren were waiting for the sign for Night Prayer. Always seen as a labour, except for the very few, it is significant that listening "willingly to holy reading" was regarded as a virtue in the monk.

The day was full of the word of God, in many different settings. The monk was already presumed to know the psalter and many short readings by heart (RB 8) and, given the capacity for memorising, it may be presumed that some of what was being read would be committed to memory. Certainly, a significant element in the normal monastic day was the practice of murmuring texts of scripture to oneself, so that the monk was always present, in some sense, to the word of God. Consciously, or unconsciously, this went part of the way to realising St. Paul's dictum, "Pray at all times" (Eph. 6, 18), a precept which was very much at the heart of the spirituality of the whole monastic movement, from its beginnings in the Desert. In those early days, it had been an issue with a competitive, even an ideological, edge to it, as is evidenced by the story of the two brothers who visited a third and found him working at his mat-making instead of praying, whereas they prayed all the time (presumably when they took time off from going around checking up on others!). The mat-maker riposted with a counter accusation that they could not claim to be praying while they were eating and sleeping, whereas he recited the psalms while he worked and, by leaving a mat outside his door, every day, for the poor, he could be sure that the poor man prayed for him while he was eating and sleeping. This reflected an on-going debate on the relative value of prayer and work in the economy of Christian life. The practice in Gaul, after the manner of St. Martin, was to pray all day, manual work being allowed only to the younger men, and even then that was copying manuscripts of Scripture. Something of the same was true in the East. The Benedictine practice seems to have been a compromise, in which the times for work and for reading are specified, with particular attention to Lent, when the early hours from six to nine were reserved for reading. It may be more than just a coincidence that it was the

practice, in Jerusalem, at this time, to conduct a daily session of scriptural catechesis from six to nine, during the days of Lent, the season which Benedict thought should condition the life of the monk. So important was this reading and, presumably, so arduous, that elders were to go round checking up that the brethren were, in fact, at their reading.

CONTENT

There is no doubt that the Bible was the primary object of this reading, but also “the holy catholic fathers”, Basil being a particular favourite of St. Benedict (RB 73). For a while, it was assumed that the “conferences” referred to just now were only those of Cassian, but others wrote conferences as well as he. Benedict also refers to “the Institutes and Lives of the Fathers” as worthy of attention. Scholars have great fun trying to work out, from allusions and resonances of the Rule, what authors Benedict might have read and so to assess the possible contents of his library. The material in Mignes patrologies of the Greek and Latin Fathers must include a part of what was current in the average monastic library, a fraction of it in Benedicts library. Certain it is that, in Lent, every monk was to “take a book from the library and read it through”(RB 49), so there must have been some variety. Lanfranc punished failure to finish last years book, before this years Lent. (An ancient book-list from St. Gall lays out the separate parts of the Bible under the title, bibliotheca, mentioning: *Heptateuch, Kings, Prophets, Gospels, Apostle*, which may suggest that only the Bible was read under this heading.) It is impossible to assess how far secular literature was fostered, in terms of personal formation. Jerome was famously hostile to the classics, but both Cassiodorus and Augustine had valued them as helps to wisdom. Generally, there seems to have been an ambivalent attitude to it, until the danger of its being lost altogether prompted some reassessment of its value and of the need to preserve it, whether or not it was read in monasteries.

In the years from the fifth to the tenth and eleventh centuries, the role of the monasteries as centres of learning and education was decisive for the future of Western civilization. The same period saw them grow in wealth, as they were endowed by the rich of the earth, so that manual work by the monks ceased to be necessary for their material welfare. But the day still had to be filled; and it was, by more liturgy and more reading.

Significantly, perhaps, this was the age of the development of Latin plainchant, which, incidentally, reinforced the liturgical use of Latin, as it highlighted specific texts and their appropriate musical modes for committal to memory. There were specific tones for reciting the Prophets, the Epistles and the Gospel readings in the liturgy. At the same time, the selections of scripture prescribed for use at the various stages of the liturgical year came to be interpreted in that particular mood; Isaiah for Advent, for example, and Exodus for Lent. It has been fairly said that “the Latin of the time was as much the product of the choir as of the scriptorium” (Illich, *In the vineyard of the text*. Chicago 1993, p.69). The monks of Cluny and its 1400 dependent houses spent an average of eight hours, in the day, in choir, which must have prejudiced their capacity for reading for another two to three hours. There is every evidence to suggest that part of the impetus of the Cistercian reform, in the twelfth century, was precisely to restore the balance between liturgy and *lectio*. Ideally, at least, these were the so-called “monastic centuries”, when it could be truly said, “for the monk, reading is not one activity but a way of life.” (I. Illich, *ibid.* p.58).

In an environment which was largely silent and where the only written word was the Latin word, Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose* may not be too far from the mark, in its representation of the monastic library and its role in the life of the monks. The book, the

written word, was everything. Except for those who were engaged in copying manuscripts, the balanced regime of manual work and reading which St. Benedict had bequeathed to his sons was but a memory, until the Cistercian movement tried to redress the balance. At the same time, *lectio* became much more of an art, more in the tradition of Origen than of Benedict. It is described in its most developed form by Hugh of St. Victor, in his *Didascalion* (c.1123) where every aspect of the activity is subjected to tortuous analysis.

THE GOAL

The goal of this reading, during these “monastic centuries”, was the acquisition of wisdom. This was nothing new in itself; Cassian and Augustine and Jerome, had sounded the same note, centuries before; though, for Origen, the goal had been nothing less than divinization. The wisdom of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, had inspired the written word of scripture, and true human wisdom involved the absorption of the text and its meaning. “Learn to know the heart of God in the word of God”, Gregory the Great had written (Ep. 4,31). But this knowledge was not scientific; it was affective. “Read, not as a labour but for pleasure and to instruct the soul” (Jerome, Ep. 130). Centuries later, Arnold of Brescia writes, “Reading seeks not knowledge but the taste of God”. (P.L. 184, 1175b).

We have seen the four senses of scripture, imported by Cassian (*Conf* 14,9). There is no evidence to suggest that St. Benedict valued them specifically. His concern seems simply to have been that his monks put in the time at their reading and learn compunction of heart; though he does acknowledge the moral value of the exercise (RB 73). But, inevitably, the more time became available for *lectio*, the more abstruse its exercise, and the investigation of these traditional “senses” played a significant part in medieval monastic piety and homiletics, particularly with the Cistercians. Reading at this level became an increasingly technical *studium*, where the line between growth in spiritual insight and acquisition of knowledge tended to get blurred. Already, when Hugh was writing his *Didascalion*, in 1134, he was struggling to protect the autonomy of *lectio divina* as *divina*, against the counter claims of the rising fashion of the new university culture, which tended to use Scripture merely as a quarry for “proof texts” to support abstract articles of theology or philosophy. A polarization was emerging between the *sapientia* of the monastic learning and the *scientia* of the university schools, typified by the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, for example. Increasingly, the work of reading was devoted to *studium* and *lectio spiritualis*. The distinction was ominous for the ancient tradition, and the twelfth century, for all the strictures of Hugh of St. Victor, was to see the inexorable decline of the *divina* aspect of the *lectio*, as the university ethos of scientific learning, for its own sake, asserted itself, typified by the career of Peter Lombard or Peter Abelard, although efforts were made periodically to rejuvenate this aspect of the monastic ethos in the various reform movements right up to our own time — most recently in our own day. It is not accidental that the great liturgical reform of this century was pioneered with heavy scriptural emphasis by Benedictine monks of Germany, Belgium, France, and Italy.

CONTEMPORARY TRADITION

After that overview of the medieval tradition, we can leap safely to the present day, without fear of omitting much that concerns us, with a single exception. The intervening centuries saw the Reformation and the access to a vernacular Scripture and liturgy for the reformed churches but this had no positive effect on the impoverished monastic tradition. Indeed, given the polemical spirit of the age, the Catholic tradition in general

even shied away from Scripture, looking to it only for “proof texts”, in the scholastic tradition, where theology had long ceased to mean communion with God through the word, but rather, the word of doctrine. Only recently has there been a recovery of monastic *lectio* with the reform of the 1960s and the re-discovery of Scripture for the Roman Catholic world at large; and with it there has been a renewed interest in the customs of the ancients. Indeed, *lectio divina* now bids fair to compete with Bible study and meditation groups as a fashionable pursuit, in its turn.

A superficial study of the field shows an unbridgeable gap between that ancient culture and our own, with our overload of information and more books than can possibly be read. In fact, however, the issues are much the same, now as then, because the text remains the same, for all the wealth of literature surrounding it; and the critical elements are still the aim and the attitude of the one who is undertaking the reading of the text. Today's monk has to look very closely at that phrase of Ivan Illich which identifies *lectio divina* as “the way of life” of the monk. Most of us monks need to reconsider the pattern of our day and its ethos, as we struggle, along with the rest of the world, to earn a plausible living, without breaking faith with our *raison d'être*.

Interestingly enough St. Benedict's *horarium* is closer to us today than that of Cluny, for example, in that the modern daily weight of liturgy is closer to that of the sixth century than to that of the twelfth, and we have more time and energy for reading than some of our predecessors. There is novelty, too, in the situation that ours is essentially a literate society, which has lost all wonder in the face of the written word. In addition, we are all somewhat influenced by the phenomenological appreciation of every human experience as possibly having the value of a word of God, ever since Karl Rahner identified us as “hearers of the word”. There is even a sense in which words of God become words of God, because we recognise them as such. Even the uniqueness of the biblical text is undermined by the variety of editions and languages in which it is to be found and the number of commentaries and studies available to us. So that the difficulties which we face in coming to terms with the demands of *lectio* are somewhat different to those of earlier ages. In fact the exercise today may be a different one for us post-Enlightenment existentialists. And yet it needs to be stated, clearly, that the object of *lectio divina* today remains uniquely and inalienably the word of God in Scripture, among all the possible alternatives for what might be called spiritual reading. Its purpose is not edification, nor spiritual improvement, nor the arousal of religious emotion. Above all, its purpose is not a scientific exegesis of scripture. If I sound a little polemical on this score, it is because Roman Catholic scriptural scholarship, having been held back for so long, has tended to embrace the worst excesses of the German tendency to analyse and has provoked the bitter comment of Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the finest minds of the century, to the effect that “contemporary exegesis has managed to reduce the living body of scripture to an inert mess of blood and bones”. With no thought for the analytical or the scientific, as such, the object of *lectio divina* is, very specifically, the living word of God, a phenomenological event, that word which issues from the mouth of God and does not return without accomplishing its purpose. The task of the reader is to focus the mind and the will on *the activity itself*, as an occasion, or an opportunity, for an encounter with the word of God alive; between reader and word, word and reader. The reader brings a world of experience to this encounter with the word, which is always free and unpredictable in its response to the attentive ear. In a particular way, the activity of this humble and attentive reading does involve listening, just as it did for our medieval predecessors, though possibly for different reasons. Sometimes, in the struggle to overcome distraction of whatever kind, we have the experience of having to articulate words aloud and to hear them, so as to understand them. Something of this

determination is involved in the prerequisite quality of *intentio cordis* or sympathetic attention in the reader, which means that the reading is both unhurried and deliberate. The activity itself is what is important, rather than the achievement of some quantity of text read or the acquisition of a body of knowledge. And within the activity the occurrence of an encounter is its precious fruit. (Karl Barth has described this encounter as *an event without parallel*, in an analysis which makes him the master of the contemporary science of *lectio divina*, if science it be (Dogmatics 1). But consideration of his singular insight belongs more to a general study of contemporary scriptural exegesis than to this monastic context with which I am trying to deal.) Some readers manage to continue in the strength of that food, chewing over a phrase, for a few moments or a whole day. Classically, it should carry you through the times when you are not actually reading, and St. Benedict had that in mind when he discouraged conversation. In this, too, we may share something of the experience of our medieval ancestors, for whom this constituted *meditatio*, or *ruminatio*, literally a chewing, as of the cud by cattle. But, in the same breath, we are worlds away from those same ancestors who delighted to refer that rumination to *Leviticus* 11,3, in its identification of the ruminant animals as clean, suggesting that this activity was only for the clean of heart.

Everything that I have said here can, of course, be applied to the Word heard when read to us, at divine service, passive *lectio*, as it were; and there is a ritualised reminiscence of that in the liturgical responsory and the responsorial psalm, which regurgitates the essence of the readings message, as it were. But there is a particular quality in personal, active *lectio*, when the reader is at liberty to pause, on being struck by a word or phrase, to savour it, to wonder and to pray. This being struck can be just that, being pierced to the heart by that double-edged sword, being moved to tears of joy or sorrow, or just to tears as a gift, with the possible consequence of penitence and interior strengthening. The greatest of the scholars in the Benedictine sphere of monastic studies, A. de Vogue, has pointed out that, in midst of a rather tedious list, *The Tools of Good Works* (RB 4, 51-8), there is a progression of thought from silence, through reading, repentance and tears, to reforming ones behaviour. It is a sequence of thought which is exactly matched in St. Benedict's thoughts on how Lent is to be dealt with (RB 49), where, in the inconvenient way in which St. Benedict often does, he observes that "the life of a monk ought always to be lenten in character".

I want to conclude with a personal insight, in proposing for your consideration a text to which I have not seen others refer in this realm of *lectio divina* and its *raison d'être*.

Make my word your home, and then you will be my disciples (Jn 8,31).

This text from John has a particular force, in the context of the monastic world, where men and women have left their family home and can often experience an interior aridity in the community context in which they find themselves having to be "at home". Home is the place where I have the unquestioned right to my own space, to be me, be accepted as I am, the place where I am best able to relax and rest in a quiet joy. How many of us experience this kind of home? Few enough, I think, with the scriptural comment on the fact easily to hand, *Here we have no abiding city*. The invitation to make God's word my "home" is peculiarly personal and, even, intimate. "Invitation" may be too mild a term, because there is a sense in which the realisation of it is presented as the condition of discipleship. In the light of this, I invite you to take a look at the first half of *Cap. 15*, 1-17 of the same Gospel of John, some time, and to consider its implications, in terms of the intimacy of its language and ideas. To my listening ear, it has much to say about life at home as life within the trinitarian godhead. At any rate, in the monastic context, which is my province, the monk will be at home, for the moment, to the extent that he is able to

relax with the word. Ideally, then, the monastery will be a place where the word can reverberate, intimately, in the heart of each one, and so be home to each monk, in his particular way. Morning and evening, in today's monastery is the traditional time for this *lectio divina*, with its prospect of a privileged encounter with the word of God; they are good times to be at home.

Response

Revd Katherine Meyer

My grandmother, who lived to be 92 years of age, was called Hulda. Huldah, you may recall, was the prophet in Jerusalem to whom King Josiah turned for guidance when the scroll of the Torah was discovered to have been in the temple all along, and to have some not entirely comfortable things to say about the conduct of Judah. In this case, it was not Huldah who unearthed these troublesome writings, but she herself did not hesitate, even before the king, to comment publicly on their implications.

It was this Huldah after whom my grandmother was named, and although my grandmother's life was very different from that of her foremother in Judah, she treated the Scriptures with equal seriousness, though not, in spite of her evangelical and Reformed convictions, without a sense of humour. It was the pattern of her life, when I was a child, to begin each day, before breakfast, with what she called morning devotions. This pattern included the reading, aloud, of a passage from the Scriptures, and a time of quiet attentiveness to what had been heard, the very memory of which threw my younger sister and me into uncontrollable fits of giggles for years after her death. I do not think she would have minded that, but I also think that she would have been pleased to know that we remembered her daily devotions with such clarity, as well as amusement, and that we learned from her that the Scriptures belonged on the breakfast table along with the teapot.

And I mention my grandmother to you now because she is undoubtedly part of the reason why my earliest memories of hearing Scriptures read aloud are memories neither of content nor of imposition but of roominess, of space in which to move around. No-one minded if I looked out of the window during morning devotions and watched the bright red birds swooping into the pines. And no-one minded if on Sunday mornings, during the sermon, I pulled out my crayons and turned the printed prayer of confession on the order of service into a herd of elephants, or wrote notes to my sister among the church announcements.

And so there is something deep within my adult Christian feminist Presbyterian self which resonates whole-heartedly with the image of the word of God in Scripture as a place where I can be at home, where, as Christopher Dillon put it so engagingly, there is room for me to be.

And yet this same adult self has also learned that just as home can be the most dangerous place for a woman to be, so the Scriptures can be a dangerous place, particularly for women, in which to try to live. Every home has its own complicated past, its memories, its patterns of behaviour, and its voices, which continue to influence and colour the experience of those who come to live in it. When I move in, I cannot ignore those patterns but can only seek, when necessary, to live differently within them, making it impossible for them to continue unquestioned as before. And so too I cannot, I think, come and make my home in the word of God as it comes to me in Scripture without a willingness to face and then to articulate something of the history of its public use.

After all, one of the most painful aspects of the current public debate on marriage is the reminder it is providing, if we needed any reminder, of how little, in terms of intimacy and respect, many of us have been taught to think we are worth. And this in a context in which our understanding of marriage has been shaped largely by the churches, who in turn would all claim to have been shaped by Scripture.

But I think that it is also probably true to say that in another and very different sense, Scripture was never meant to be a safe place in which to be at home. For the word of God is a home which nurtures people in the ability to respond to Scripture with its own voice, and to question, on the basis of Scripture itself, some of the understandings which have made this home a safe place for some, but a dangerous place for others. And out of such questions emerges the possibility that the word of God, while never safe, is yet life-giving, both for those who have been oppressed by its use and for those who have built their own security around it. And there is, after all, Biblical precedent for hearing in the word of God itself a call to leave your father's house and journey to the place God will show you.

And the first step on this journey, of course, is that of crying out, and discovering, perhaps in that very moment of attentiveness and openness to encounter with the living God of which Christopher spoke so eloquently, that God is not only a God who speaks but a God who hears. Perhaps the scroll of the Torah whose significance Huldah was asked to interpret included the story of how the Israelites, when they were slaves in Egypt, cried out. Not to anybody in particular, just in pain. And God heard them, not because God is God, but because God was listening. Perhaps it was in that experience of being heard that the Israelites caught their first glimpse of the promised land. But it was certainly on that journey that they found a home, and we, who carry their story with us, surely cannot give up our hope that our journey too, while never safe, will finally bring us to life